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FourFourTwo COLLECTION



CELEBRATING THE GAMES, GOALS AND GREATS THAT HAVE SHAPED FFT

Digital Edition

FUTURE
VOLUME 4

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WELCOME

So it happened then. The moment that many thought they would never see finally unfolded on a dramatic December night in Qatar in a fascinating game involving France. That's right, we're talking about Harry Kane missing that crucial second penalty. You could be forgiven for thinking we meant another jaw-dropping event that same month – the one that saw a Messi-inspired Argentina draw 3-3 with holders France before defeating them on penalties to hand the little maestro the ultimate prize. But more importantly, has winning the World Cup catapulted the gravity-defying genius to number 1 in our all-time list of greats?

Speaking of greats, we've been catching up with quite a few recently, including Anfield's Egyptian king Mo Salah, Azzurri and Juventus legend Alessandro Del Piero, and Lioness playmakers and Euro 2022 champions Keira Walsh and Beth Mead. We've also been trying to divine where on Earth teenage world-beater Jude Bellingham could be heading next.

Despite all this we found the time to count down the greatest footballing video games ever to grace a screen, dared to explore the glittering career of hardman Roy Keane, judged 92 club badges (sorry Burton) and found out what it takes to be a successful assistant manager. Oh, and we spoke to Gary Neville about cats...

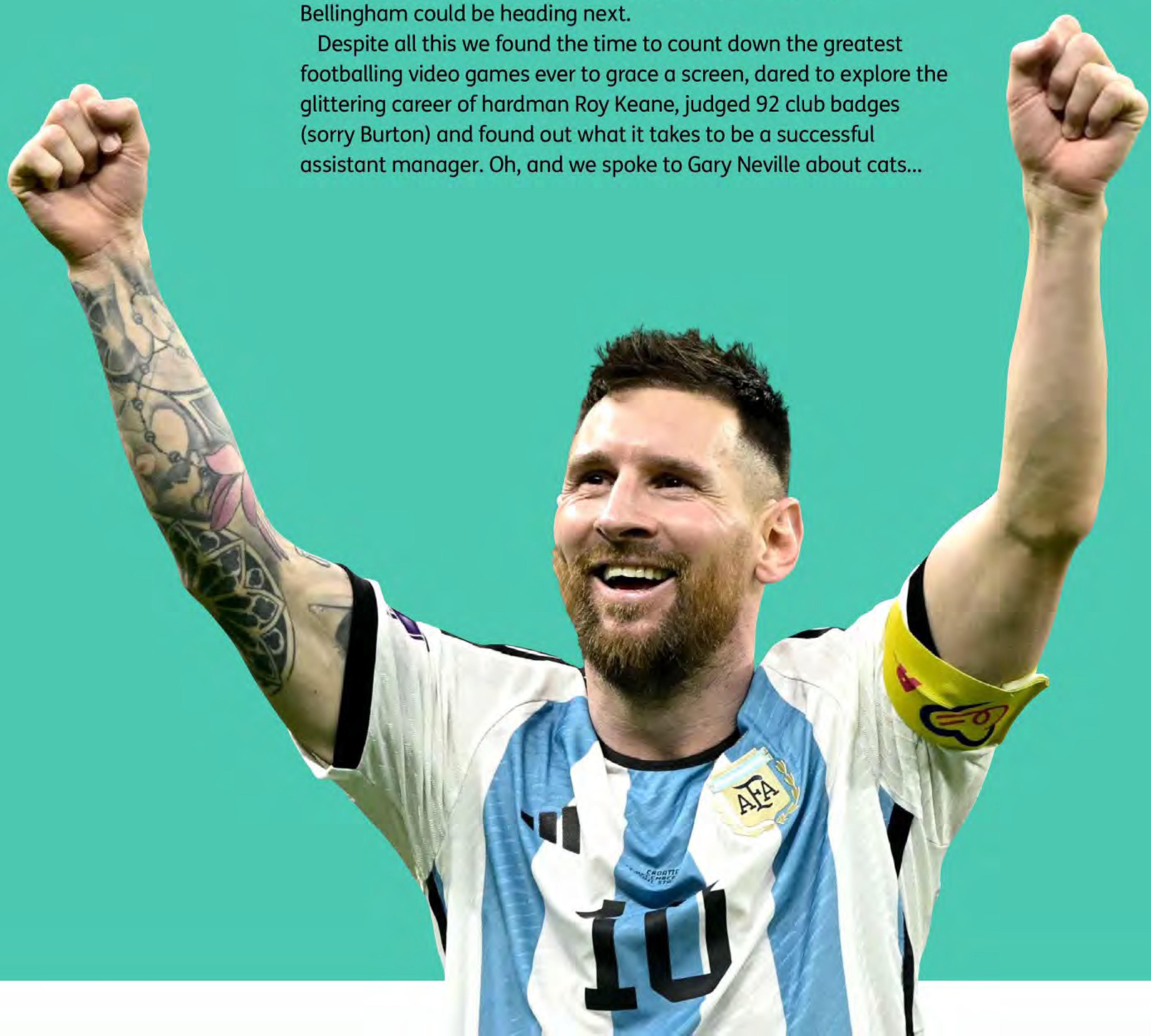


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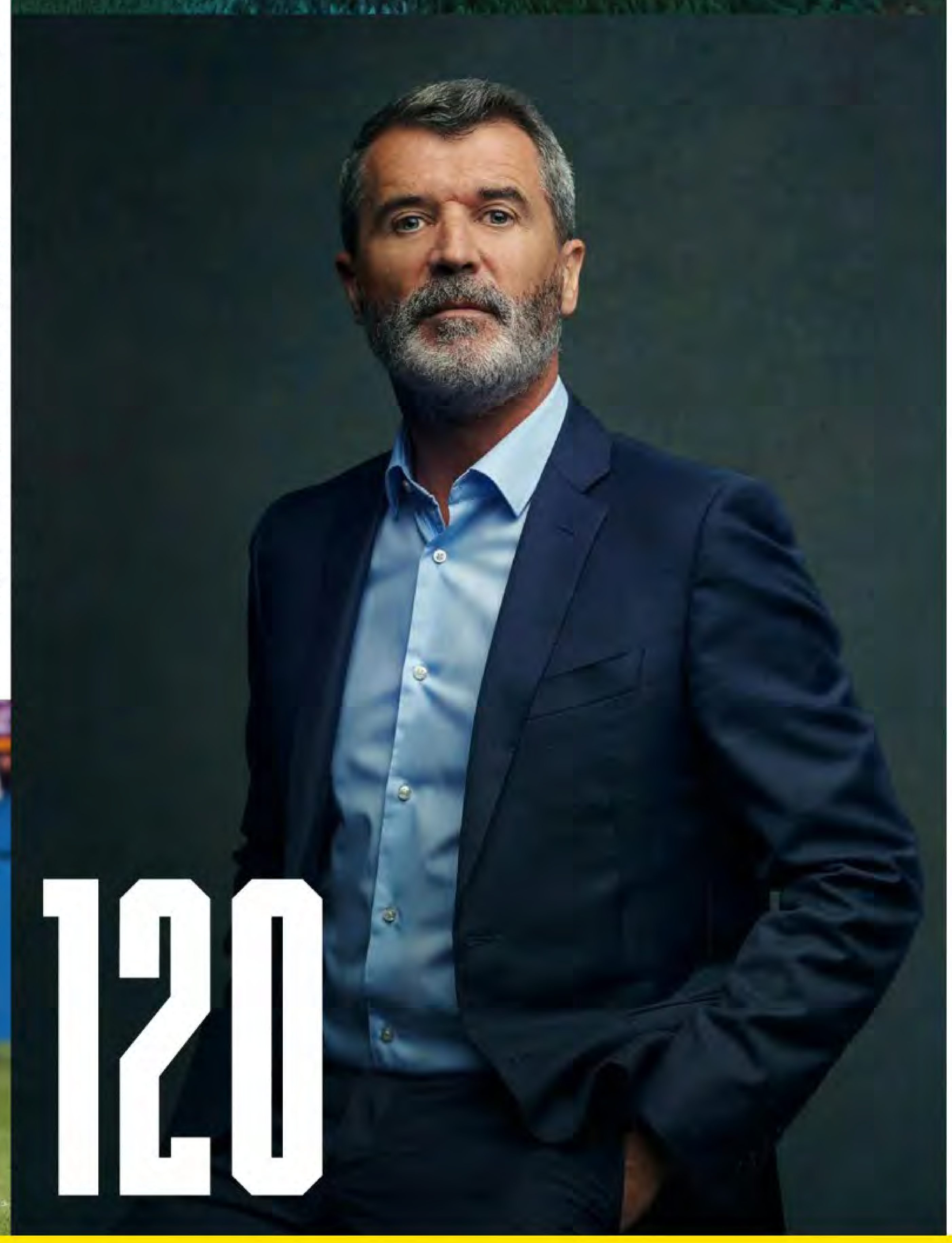



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1&1



ECHTE LIEBE

Real Love, that's what those who have worked with Jude Bellingham feel for the Borussia Dortmund teenager. English football's new superstar wooed the rest of the world too, in Qatar – but who'll win the race to sign him?

Words Chris Flanagan

Before Christmas in 2019, Birmingham boss Pep Clotet called his senior players into a meeting.

After a promising start to their Championship campaign, the West Midlands side were in the middle of a run of just one win in 12 games, crashing to a 3-0 defeat at mid-table Hull. Their play-off aspirations had all but disappeared as Blues slid rapidly down the league table.

For a club stuck in the second tier since 2011, the months ahead looked like being another trudge; another potential battle to avoid relegation. Squad morale was beginning to flag. But this season wouldn't be forgotten as the others were, and Clotet knew it.

"I told the players, 'Just remember one thing'," the Catalan coach tells *FourFourTwo* now. "I said, 'If we stay in the league and what I have in my mind comes true, this is going to be one season that you'll remember for the rest of your lives. You will be able to tell your grandkids that you played with Jude Bellingham in his first season. You don't see the meaning of this now, but one day you will understand it'."

At that moment, Bellingham was 16 years of age and had made only a handful of first-team appearances. Already, though, it was clear he was destined for the very top.

THE STOURBRIDGE CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

A boyhood Blues fan, Bellingham had been inspired from the start by his dad, Mark, a police officer and – more to the point – a prolific non-league striker with Halesowen, Sutton Coldfield and more. Jude and brother Jobe, two years his junior, would hone their skills on a patch of grass outside their home in the village of Hagley, near Stourbridge, on the south-western outskirts of Birmingham.

"We'd be out there from morning until night, especially in the summer, when we didn't have school," Jude later revealed. "It would always end with us as best mates or the worst enemies ever; the amount of times we came in with tears streaming down our faces are countless! Every game we played, we said it was the Champions League final."

Birmingham snapped up Bellingham at just seven years old. "We got a call from a friend of my dad at the club, who said, 'He's doing OK – you might as well bring him along to see if he's any good'," recalled Jude, self-deprecatingly. "I went, and they saw something in me that they could develop."

And develop he did, guided by the club and his family, who drove home the importance of attitude. "The message from my parents," he said, "was: 'If you're going to do it, you're going to do it 100 per cent'. Whenever I had a strop on, my dad would remind me of that. It's how I've been ever since."

Bellingham kept coaching staff on their toes, largely due to his determination to succeed. "If he wasn't happy with a session or the route his development was going in, he would be the first person to let me know," said Mike Dodds, who coached him for close to 10 years and has since been described by Bellingham as his biggest influence outside of his family. "Jude was always very honest and always very driven. At times he didn't articulate himself the way you'd want, but that's just a part of being a teenager. He is a magnificent human being."

Aged 13, he was an England international, too. Bellingham was introduced for his under-15s debut a year earlier than might have been expected, and 12 months later he was captaining the side, before moving up to the under-16s and starring in 4-0 wins over France and Brazil.

At club level, his display against Liverpool's under-16s caught the eye as Birmingham won the Blades Cup final 8-4. "He scored four and set up three," reminisces Dodds, the team's coach. One goal was a solo run from halfway. Roy of the Rovers was wearing blue.

In the summer of 2019, days after his 16th birthday, Bellingham joined Birmingham's first-team squad for the start of pre-season – promoted by new manager Pep Clotet, previously the assistant under Garry Monk. Nearly four years later, Clotet is speaking to *FFT* to share his memories of working with Bellingham, when the conversation turns to the shirt number that the midfielder chose that summer and has kept ever since: No.22. Dodds had once told the youngster that he should aspire not just to be a four, an eight or a 10, but a 22 – a midfielder who could sit, maraud and create all in the same package.



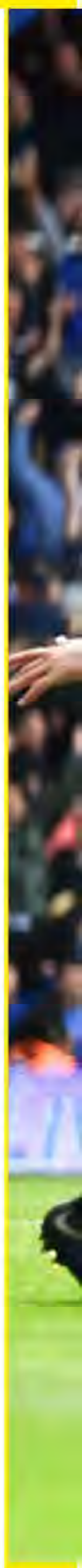
Clotet knows pretty much everything about Bellingham and remains very close to his former protégé, but he looks puzzled when we mention this fact. To him, 22 had simply been a random number. "I will ask him – I'll see if he's not training and I'll ask him now!" says the smiling former Birmingham boss, surprising *FFT* by picking up his phone and calling the player himself. "Hey Jude, just a quick one? Yeah, everything is all right. Just a quick one: why did you pick the 22 shirt at Blues? And why four, why eight and why 10? That's all the positions you can play? All right! No, it's because a journalist told me and I said, 'F**king hell, you know more than me!' I said, 'I'll ask him!' All right, thanks – that was it. Keep on, I'll speak to you later!"

The Catalan has been managing in Italy since leaving Birmingham in 2020, including three spells with Massimo Cellino's Brescia, where he was sacked in December, reinstated in January and then sacked again in February, in the most Cellino sequence of events it's possible to imagine. However, Clotet still visits Bellingham at his family home when they are both back in England, and has very fond memories of working with him.

"The year I watched Jude for the first time, I was assistant manager," the 45-year-old explains. "I was involved in the decision of promoting him from the under-16s to the under-21s, and to make everyone aware that he could even do some training with the first team. He did a couple of sessions, then I was promoted to manager and the club was very keen on promoting young talent. I thought it would be great to have him in the team for pre-season, to see how he managed himself in the first-team environment.

"He was like a professional from day one. We went to Portugal and played against professional teams out there, but he put in







a performance like the rest of the team; he was as fit as the rest, and he had a terrific mindset. He would stay on after training to develop his skills – he was really critical of everything he did. I'd say, 'Don't put pressure on yourself – you're not going to get every pass right'. He'd say, 'Yeah, but I missed that pass and I shouldn't have missed it'. He was always working to raise his standards. You could see there was no roof to his ability."

SAYING NO TO FERGIE AND CANTONA

Bellingham's maiden appearance came in the first round of the League Cup, away to League One Portsmouth in August 2019. Aged 16 years and 38 days, he was the club's youngest ever player – a record previously held by Trevor Francis. An inexperienced Birmingham side lost 3-0 live on Sky, but Bellingham's own performance earned him man of the match in the *Birmingham Mail*. He had shown no nerves whatsoever.

"On the contrary, if you spoke to him, he'd say, 'I'm ready, I think I should be playing'," laughs Clotet. "I remember saying before the game, 'I'm going to play you as an offensive midfielder. Don't try to do everything on your own – just bed yourself into the game'. He was one of the best players on the pitch. He supported the midfield, he joined the strikers and he had a brilliant chance to score, and got very angry because he thought that by his standards, he should have scored.

"Seeing him that night, I already thought, 'Wow, that's not normal', because he played like an important player even though he was the youngest. I thought, 'This boy is ready'. I spoke to my assistant, Paco Herrera, who worked with Rafa Benitez when Liverpool won the Champions League. He said, 'I think that boy's going to be something'."

Above How it feels to get the winner on your home debut **Left** Clotet can – and will – call Jude at any time for a Pep talk **Below left** The youngest ever Birmingham City player stood out in his own right

Bellingham had to wait a mere 19 days for his league bow, although to him it felt like a lifetime. "After my Birmingham debut," he later reflected, "I had a two- or three-week gap where I couldn't get in the team."

Clotet was waiting patiently for the right moment. First, a late substitute appearance at Swansea. Then, the day that Bellingham has since described as the best of his life. Introduced for his home debut after just half an hour against Stoke – replacing the injured Jefferson Montero – he'd score the winning goal in front of the Tilton End with a quarter of an hour remaining by firing a deflected effort into the net, before an attempted knee slide ended with him nearly face-planting the turf. He didn't care, springing to his feet and celebrating some more. His boyhood dream had come true.

"That goal felt pre-destined," Clotet tells *FFT*. "Top players do some incredible things straightaway. His first goal at St Andrew's – it was an amazing moment. He was really on a high after that game, although he was still complaining that he'd made a couple of silly mistakes! I said, 'Jude, we won, you made your home debut and you scored – you don't get it better than that!' From that day on, he started games for the rest of the season. He played 41 [league] matches."

In his next outing, Bellingham scored the winner again, away at Charlton. He operated as a wide midfielder in his early games. "He was always going to be a central midfielder, but I wanted to bed him in," reveals Clotet. "He could play wide with the freedom to come inside, without the fear that if he made a mistake, we could end up paying for it. I'm not risk-averse but, as a coach, you can end up totally messing up the player. I wanted to make sure he could be a success, then his confidence grew. Later in the campaign, he played more centrally."

"AT BIRMINGHAM, JUDE REFUSED A MEETING WITH MANCHESTER UNITED SO HE DIDN'T MISS TRAINING"

Quickly, a host of clubs began to take an interest in Bellingham, and it was inevitable that Birmingham would receive an offer they couldn't refuse. "All of the biggest teams in Europe wanted him – Manchester United, Liverpool, Manchester City, Chelsea, Bayern Munich, Borussia Dortmund, Juventus..." says Clotet. "I remember having a meeting with the ownership, asking, 'Can I guarantee he's still going to be here at the end of the January transfer window?' They said, 'You never know, but we hope so'. The club always wanted to do a deal in the summer, unless someone came in really strong in January. They were good with that situation. That was the campaign of the coronavirus, though: in ▶



March there was a big economic crisis in football and the club were nervous, because they had put hope on a transfer for Jude which would be a massive help financially."

Many feared that the transfer market would crash and fees would plummet as all clubs reduced their spending. Meanwhile, Clotet had to make sure that 16-year-old Bellingham could continue to flourish after restrictions were eased.

"With Jude we had a problem," explains the manager, "because he was a minor and couldn't come to training on his own. The rules were strict: no one else was allowed into the training ground. So, I decided to take his brother, Jobe, into training as well. He was 14 and his parents were working, so he couldn't be left at home on his own. To help Jude so he could train, we brought Jobe with us; they came together and Jobe is a really good player.

"During that period, I also spoke to Jude about interest from other clubs – never to find out where he was heading, because that wasn't my business; I told him, 'I'm going to be your fan wherever you go'. But I needed to find out if it was affecting him, because we had some important games to play. I never saw him lose focus, though. It was unbelievable how he managed it. Massive credit to the family: another player would lose their head at that moment. One day, the CEO said, 'Jude isn't going to be here today, because we've allowed him to go to a meeting with Manchester United' – but Jude ended up refusing it so that he didn't miss training!

"He was very clear to me that his priority would be a club who offered him a way to continue his development. He wasn't thinking about money. Dortmund offered him a way to bed himself into the Bundesliga and play in Europe, our club did a brilliant negotiation, and it was win-win for all parties."

Xuandong Ren, Blues' chief executive at the time, later claimed that Manchester United offered Bellingham twice as much money as anyone else, even getting Sir Alex Ferguson and Eric Cantona involved to try to persuade him. Two days before the end of the season, however, it was confirmed he'd be joining Dortmund for an initial £25 million.

The midfielder turned out one last time for Birmingham – behind closed doors, sadly denied his chance to say a proper goodbye to the fans – before the club surprisingly retired his shirt number, even though he had played only one season and was still just 17. It drew much mirth from fans of other clubs. "At the time, even I thought the club went a bit ahead of themselves with that!" says Clotet, chuckling. "But they were convinced what Jude would become."

"MAYBE HE'S A LIAR"

Dortmund proved to be the perfect fit for the teenager. On his debut in the DFB-Pokal, he needed just half an hour to become the club's youngest ever goalscorer, then started the opening Bundesliga game of the campaign, laying on a goal for Giovanni Reyna in a 3-0 victory against Borussia Monchengladbach.





Two months after his England Under-21 debut in September 2020, he was a late call-up to Gareth Southgate's senior squad for a friendly against the Republic of Ireland, for whom Bellingham also qualified, via a grandparent. "I went to meet up with the under-21s and the manager, Aidy Boothroyd, said, 'What are you doing here?'" recalled Bellingham. "I said, 'What do you mean? Have I not been called up?' I was so worried! But there was an injury with the senior team and Gareth wanted me with them."

Days later, he was coming on for his senior debut. He'd already got to know Southgate, who had spent time chatting to Bellingham when he was on England duty in the junior age groups. The squad welcomed him, too.

"The thing I was worried about was that I played in Germany," he said. "The players were going to be talking about their games and wouldn't have a clue what we'd done at Dortmund or who I was." Fat chance. He was already known as a rising superstar, and the players made him feel at home immediately.

By the season's end, he'd been voted the Bundesliga's newcomer of the season, won the DFB-Pokal and started seven Champions League matches as Dortmund reached the last eight. After Bellingham placed a curling shot past Ederson in defeat to Manchester City, Pep Guardiola declared, "I can't believe he's 17. Maybe he's a liar!"

Fitness and conditioning coach Patrick Eibenberger, who arrived with new manager Marco Rose that summer, was thoroughly

Left Borussia Dortmund were the right team for Bellingham's development **Above left** "So, go and play as a No.10... and an 8... and a 4" **Above** Could he follow Haaland to Manchester? **Right** A debut at 17, wearing 17



impressed by Bellingham. "He was 18, but it didn't seem like I was speaking to someone that age," says Eibenberger. "He has an aura – you feel he could be 10 years older. Usually, players that age have a different persona around coaches, but he was pretty open. It was refreshing: you could just speak, without having to talk in circles around a topic.

"That's credit to his parents. Jude doesn't present himself as the world's greatest, and he won't give you the feeling that you're worthless compared to him. He treats you on eye-level. That maturity got him respect in the dressing room from well-known players such as Mats Hummels and Marco Reus. He wasn't a guy who simply talked; he backed it up with performances. He was very consistent and could be a leader on the pitch.

"He was always on point with his physical ability. He was playing in a position with a lot of physical output, but he could do it week in, week out, in back-to-back matches. He's that kind of boy who is really talented in so many sporting activities – he said he could have become a decent cricketer, and I was surprised because it's such a different sport. His athleticism is fascinating."

His work ethic, too. On occasion, the young star had to be convinced not to overdo it.

"Jude was constantly working out in the gym every day – he has an insatiable hunger for improvement," the fitness chief tells *FFT*. "My job sometimes was not only to guide him, but also to restrict him from training, because recovery is important. Jude didn't ▸

"YOU CAN WEAR NO.1 WHEN YOU'RE SENT HERE BY GOD"

Bellingham's in an elite club of players who've had a shirt number retired, with Bradley Wright-Phillips and an honest-to-God Pope

CRACOVIA

The Polish club haven't let anyone wear No.1 since 2005, when their squad visited Pope John Paul II at the Vatican, just three months before his death. God's emissary – this one, anyway – was a boyhood Cracovia fan and a goalkeeper in his youth, you see.



SAO PAULO

The Brazilians also retired their No.1 jersey... sort of. Their legendary goalscoring goalkeeper, Rogerio Ceni, actually wore 01, so Sao Paulo just retired that shirt, which no one was going to wear anyway, and handed their new shot-stopper the No.1.

NY RED BULLS

Bradley Wright-Phillips didn't become a legend in England, but he did smash a century of goals in MLS, so Red Bulls retired his No.99 shirt. After leaving in his mid-thirties for a couple of years elsewhere, he returned to sign a one-day contract last March so that he could retire at the club. Aww.

MILAN

If you want to wear No.3 or No.6 for Milan – standard fare for a defender – then tough. Both are retired in honour of Paolo Maldini and Franco Baresi, with No.3 promised to one of Maldini's sons if they become a Rossoneri regular. It hasn't happened yet: Daniel, 21, is now on loan at Spezia.

FC KÖLN

Lukas Podolski was a hero at Köln, and after he left in 2012 they retired his No.10 shirt for as long as he was an active player. Two years later, they changed their mind, giving it to Patrick Helmes. "I didn't respect that," a miffed Poldi told *FFT*, while Helmes retired at the season's end anyway.

care much about recovery – he just wanted to train! But he learned over time that he also requires a certain amount of rest."

Even in the gym, Bellingham was dictating proceedings, adapting the music to his liking.

"No matter how packed the gym was, when Jude walked in he made it his living room," says a smiling Eibenberger. "It was about his music and his exercises. Not in an arrogant manner, but everyone knew Jude needed to be the DJ! He set the vibe, and he was always the one who stayed the longest."

Early in the 2021-22 campaign, Bellingham scored the finest goal of his career so far, showing neat footwork to slalom through Arminia Bielefeld's defence and slot home. Yet goals and assists reveal just a scintilla of his scintillating all-round game. The manner in which this teenage midfielder could read the game, win the ball, beat the press and break through the opposition lines – his union of tenacity and technique – won Bellingham no few admirers, and he soon came second only to Barcelona's Pedri in the voting for the Kopa Trophy, *France Football*'s award for the world's best under-21 player.

He did land himself in hot water after a 3-2 defeat to Bayern Munich, in which he deftly set up both Dortmund goals but felt that a number of refereeing decisions had gone against his side. "You give a referee that has match-fixed before, the biggest game in Germany – what do you expect?" declared Bellingham in a rare moment of controversy,

"MADRID ARE CONFIDENT HE WANTS TO PLAY FOR THEM, BUT LIVERPOOL AND CITY WILL MAKE BIG BIDS"

even if it was true that Felix Zwayer had been banned for six months for a role in a fixing scandal in 2005. The DFB didn't take kindly to the midfielder's unguarded comments, fining him €40,000. "A more experienced version of Jude might handle that situation a bit differently," admits Eibenberger. "But he meant what he said, actually."

Fittingly, the No.22's breakout year at the highest level came in 2022. He already had nine goals for Dortmund when the elite club season paused for the World Cup; four came in as many consecutive Champions League matches, including another strike against Manchester City in another 2-1 defeat, and a goal and an assist in a 4-1 win at Sevilla – as Dortmund's captain, still just 19 years of age. Naturally, he scored the opener in his first appearance after the World Cup as well.

In an England shirt, he had turned his cameo roles at the European Championship, as a late substitute against Croatia, Czech Republic and Ukraine, into a regular starring role during the Nations League. Bellingham was now ready to shine on the biggest stage of all, in Qatar – and boy, did he do that.

Against Iran, scoring his first Three Lions goal prompted an inevitable rendition of The Beatles' *Hey Jude* from the travelling supporters. "I've probably heard that song about 10 million times," joked the midfielder recently. "As soon as I started playing professionally, people would come up to me and sing it." Against Senegal, his driving runs helped to set up goals for Jordan Henderson and Harry Kane. All of this was done with one person in mind. "When the anthems play, I think about who I'm playing for," he said. "My grandad isn't long passed away, and he loved his country so much."

Bellingham's impressive World Cup wasn't about big moments, but the little things, too: the way he was the only player to console Kane after the striker's penalty miss against France, and the way he spoke out in support of Henderson completely unprompted during a post-match interview. "I've seen some of the rubbish that was said about him playing – honestly, it's ridiculous," fumed Bellingham. "He is so underrated. I think it's time he gets a little respect." The teenager sounded like an experienced pro.

"He's compassionate – he's always been like that," continues Clotet. "Watching him at the World Cup, I saw that he was ready to become a leader of that England team. I saw him on a different level at that tournament. He always produces his maximum, but in



UH OH, THERE'S TWO OF THEM...



Jude isn't the only England international in his family – brother Jobe, 17, has also represented his country a dozen times.

A rangy, highly technical footballer still growing into his frame, Jobe progressed to England's under-18s this season, having previously lined up for the under-16s and under-17s. He was on Birmingham's bench last term, aged 15 – even earlier than Jude – and made his debut five months later, becoming the Blues' second-youngest ever player, behind his brother.

This season, Jobe has been a frequent squad presence in the Championship as a substitute and occasional starter. Could both Bellingham brothers play together for England one day? Don't bet against it.





important games, that maximum is doubled. In the Champions League, you see an even better version of Jude than in the Bundesliga. The World Cup was a moment of reality – to see where Jude was at – and we all saw it. He played even better than in the Champions League. Fantastic performances. All of them."

LET BATTLE COMMENCE

So, it's little wonder that Europe's grandest clubs are queueing up once again. As of mid-February, Liverpool are the bookmakers' favourites ahead of Real Madrid, Manchester City, Manchester United and Chelsea. Jurgen Klopp has long been an admirer, and opted not to buy an elite midfielder last summer. "Bellingham is almost essential for Liverpool now, given that the club seemingly forfeited signing another midfielder in order to wait for him," says Matt Ladson from *This Is Anfield*.

Not that it's so straightforward. Unlike with Erling Haaland, reportedly there is no release clause in Bellingham's contract, so any club will have to pay a significant fee if they're to persuade Dortmund to sell. Reports suggest BVB rate him at around £130m, and the Reds have often struggled to compete financially with the very wealthiest clubs.

"There's massive concern about that," says Ladson. "But the chances must be good, at the very least; otherwise, the club risk looking ridiculous if they don't get him. All the talk suggests Bellingham is interested and would like the story of playing for Liverpool. He'd fit perfectly on the right of a midfield three and bring some much-needed goal threat from midfield. Energy, too.

"He seemed to spend time with Jordan Henderson and Trent Alexander-Arnold at the World Cup. That might help – he could play alongside Trent for the next decade, and have Henderson as his mentor. He'd probably end up becoming the captain."

Whether Liverpool's difficult 2022-23 campaign will work against them remains to be seen, and the same could be said of Manchester City being hit with charges of flouting Financial Fair Play rules. City would otherwise have the financial clout, and can offer Bellingham the chance to work not just with Pep Guardiola but with Haaland, his former Dortmund team-mate. "With talk of a takeover at Manchester United, they could be a force to be reckoned with as well," says former Liverpool midfielder Charlie Adam. "I'd love to see him playing for Liverpool, though – he'd definitely make them better.

"When I was at Reading, I sat on the bench watching Jude play for Birmingham and said, 'This kid is going to be a top player'. It was the way he demanded the ball, drove his team and showed personality. He knows the English game, so he wouldn't need much time to adapt in the Premier League. I think he might end up at Real Madrid first, though. It's difficult to turn them down."

In Spain, the feeling is that this time, unlike with Kylian Mbappe, Florentino Perez could get his man. "Bellingham is Real Madrid's primary target," confirms *Marca*'s Jon Prada. "Luka Modric and Toni Kroos are 37 and 33, and they want a younger player to replace them, to mix with Eduardo Camavinga, Fede Valverde and Aurelien Tchouameni. They have been in contact in the last year. Their relationship with Dortmund's board is close and they're confident that Bellingham wants to play for Real Madrid – that's the message they're receiving from the player's camp. But clubs like Manchester City and Liverpool will make big offers, too."

Clotet also wonders if Real may have the edge, although he emphasises to *FFT* that he has no inside information on the matter. "My opinion shouldn't be listened to, because I would never ask Jude about something like this," Bellingham's former Birmingham boss tells us. "However, Real Madrid not only have an excellent team; it's also the best young team. They're going in a very good direction.

"It's a club that would help him to get to the next level, because you don't go there to compete – you go to win. You really contest every single competition. The Premier League is fantastic because it's very competitive, but because of that, it's difficult to pick a team and say, 'OK, every year from now until the end of my contract, I'm going to compete to win the Champions League'.

"At the same time, though, I would love to see him in England, because I think he could make a difference at any big team in England. Jude fits everywhere."

Wherever Bellingham ends up, Clotet will be happy that the 16-year-old he introduced in a League Cup tie at Fratton Park is turning into one of the world's best players.

"Even at the time, I felt like we were doing something special," the Catalan says now. "Everyone helped him out – his family, his team-mates, the directors, all of the staff... I'm so proud of them. OK, we didn't win the league or get promoted that season, but we did something special, everyone together, with Jude at the centre of it. We were helping someone who'd have a surname that would be recognised all over the world."

Already, Bellingham has achieved so much that he has a giant mural in his honour in Stourbridge and another outside St Andrew's, where he returned to a hero's reception in the days immediately after England's World Cup elimination. Also in Birmingham, a bridge for the new HS2 rail link is set to be named after the maestro.

Retiring that No.22 shirt doesn't look quite so daft now, after all. Four, plus eight, plus 10. Jude Bellingham equals the future.

Left "Great gym session, Jude – now have a rest, for God's sake" **Above** England's standout player at Qatar 2022? **Top right** The goals have kept coming in 2023

“AM I THE BEST PLAYER IN THE WORLD? IN MY MIND, YES”

Mohamed Salah has become a Liverpool legend in less than five years at Anfield – but he’ll never tell you his appetite is sated. With more trophies to be won and personal accolades to aim for, the Ballon d’Or hopeful exclusively tells *FourFourTwo* why he’s not satisfied just yet, and why remaining on Merseyside is in his heart

Words Chris Flanagan **Portraits** Nick Eagle





"I hope he's got his slippers on..." Maybe greatness always starts with an enquiry about slip-ons – because it's certainly how it all began for Mohamed Salah. The Egyptian was spending his very first morning at Liverpool in the summer of 2017, and he had to be dressed for the occasion. No slippers, no deal – at least if the waiting nurse had anything to do with it, her assertion couched with an authoritative tone that suggested this may not have been the first footballer's medical she'd ever overseen. Perhaps all who aim for legendary status at Anfield must first don the comfortable footwear and win her seal of approval.

Thankfully, she was never going to get any trouble from Salah. Liverpool's new signing emerged from behind a door giggling like a schoolboy, ready for his MRI scan, wearing a pair of natty white slippers – the sort of freebies you get at a posh hotel spa – and a fetching hospital gown. "Oh, you look nice!" laughed the nurse. "You can't take them home, though..." Spoilsport.

"I EXPECT GREAT THINGS OF MYSELF. I THINK POSITIVELY EVEN IF I DON'T ACHIEVE IT"

The video of this exchange still remains on Liverpool's YouTube channel, charting the No.11's first day as a Red, and seems ever more surreal in the context of the five years that have followed – five years that have turned Salah into one of the greatest players in the history of an already fabled club.

The nurse probably had no idea quite how significant the chuckling footballer stood in front of her was about to become – and she wouldn't have been the only one.

"I come back to this video every year," a Liverpool fan wrote online recently. "None of us knew that this was the day we signed the best player in the world."

That summer, 10 players joined Premier League clubs for a fee of £40 million or more. Salah wasn't one of them. Manchester United splashed out £75m on Romelu Lukaku and £40m on Nemanja Matic. Manchester City signed Benjamin Mendy, Kyle Walker and Bernardo Silva. Chelsea recruited Alvaro Morata and Tiemoue Bakayoko (plus a £35m Danny Drinkwater). Alexandre Lacazette moved to Arsenal, Davinson Sanchez to Spurs and Gylfi Sigurdsson to Everton. Elsewhere, Neymar switched to Paris Saint-Germain for £198m. Barcelona then shelled out £97m for Ousmane Dembele.

Liverpool paid a rather more reasonable £36.9m to lure Salah from Roma, and it bought them a man who would change the club's modern history. Now, that man is sat in front of *FourFourTwo*. He smiles as he thinks back to that day when he walked into the city, patted the 'This Is Anfield' sign for good luck and officially became a Liverpool player.

The grin is because he knew exactly what was going to happen next, even if few others did. "I had a conversation with my friends the other day," Salah tells us now. "I said, 'Do you remember what I told you when I came – that we're going to win the league and the Champions League?' They laughed when I said that, because they'd supported Liverpool for a very long time. They told me, 'Everybody comes and says the same'.

"But I always expect great things from myself. Even if you don't achieve it, I always think positively. When I arrived, I wanted to win the Premier League and I wanted to win the Champions League. I wanted to do something great for this club. In the past few years, I think we did something really good."

That's a pretty accurate assessment of his first five campaigns on Merseyside, as the undoubted star of Liverpool's first side since the 1980s to claim both domestic and European glory. Kenny Dalglish, Ian Rush, Mo Salah – his name belongs in that sort of company now, and doesn't end there. Move over, Lionel Messi: the Egyptian in the gown and slippers may well have become the finest footballer on Planet Earth.

A DINK OF BEAUTY

Ask Salah to choose his favourite Liverpool goals, and he doesn't pick the ones you might immediately expect.

He's already bagged 153 of them in just 240 appearances by the time he sits down to chat with *FFT* at his home, just hours after starting for Jurgen Klopp's side in a lunchtime fixture against Watford at Anfield. The Reds won 2-0 and he's arrived back to his family in a decidedly good mood, even though Manchester City return to the table's summit, thanks to victory at Burnley, shortly before our interview begins. In January, though, Liverpool had been as many as 14 points



Below "I can't wait to start playing with Grujic and Klavan"



behind the Sky Blues. "We're doing well," he says. "Hopefully we're going to finish the season with the title."

Salah apologises as he briefly breaks off to ask his seven-year-old daughter, the elder of his two children, to be a little quieter in the background, so he can speak to us without distractions. "Makka, please!" he says. "Sorry, two kids, big problem!" It's a joke, of course – it's obvious he adores them both.

He quickly turns back to our question, about the goals that mean most to him in the red of Liverpool. Asked for his three standouts, he doesn't have an immediate answer. "Three?" he replies, with a tone that suggests he doesn't even know where to begin, the choice is so vast. What about one, then: is that easier to pinpoint? "One?! One is tough!" he says, breaking out into laughter. You get a sense that picking one of 153 is like choosing between his two daughters.

He thinks, though, and offers the two that come to mind. Maybe some might have anticipated that he'd immediately choose the goal that won him FIFA's prestigious Puskas Award in 2018, a twist and a turn on the edge of the box at home to Everton, followed by a majestic curling effort into the far corner. Then there was the long-range thunderbolt he scored against Chelsea, as Liverpool battled Manchester City in the closing stages of the Premier League title race in 2019. Or his mesmersing solo run against City at Anfield in October, when he befuddled an array of top-quality defenders in a way that only Salah can, earning him his sixth BBC Goal of the Month award – only Wayne Rooney has ever won more.

His answer, though, is none of the above. "Maybe Man City away in the Champions League – the way I scored was really good," he says. "Then United at home [in January 2020], for sure. I can't choose one!"

We'll come back to the United goal a little later, but his first pick is instructive – particularly in choosing it over his 2021 strike against the same opposition, seen by many as far more spectacular. "That one was good, it wasn't bad..." Salah smiles modestly. "But with the one in the Champions League, it was the way that I shot."

Salah had dribbled the ball past Ederson at the Etihad Stadium in April 2018, but he was moving away from goal and the angle was tight. Nicolas Otamendi was standing in his way, before an exquisitely subtle dink floated the ball over the Argentine and into the net, almost in slow motion. It was just one kick of the ball, from no more than 10 yards out, but this was a piece of art, usually delivered with a paint brush in-hand rather than a left foot. "No one expected I was going to shoot with someone on the line," says the footballing Picasso. "In my mind, there was more joy for a goal like that." ▶

Not least because it was right in front of the Liverpool faithful, and he'd effectively secured a place in their first Champions League semi-final for a decade – it was a crucial away goal which sent them into a 4-1 aggregate lead, against a team that would accrue a record 100 Premier League points that season. If his popularity among Reds fans was already soaring, towards the end of a stellar first season at Anfield, then this was the goal that cemented the bond, began to create a bona fide club legend and proved he was capable of delivering decisive moments in the very biggest of matches.

In Klopp's first two seasons as Liverpool boss, the Reds had made clear progress, but finished eighth and fourth in the Premier League, also losing in the League Cup and Europa League finals. With Salah in their team, absolutely anything had become possible – the player himself knew that, too. From the moment he arrived, he always did.

"When I had the conversation with the manager and he showed me the plan for the club, I was so excited by it," he remembers. "I said, 'Yeah, I think we have a team to win something.' From the beginning, I thought we could do something special."

That they reached the Champions League final in his debut campaign, despite losing Philippe Coutinho to Barcelona in January, said much about Salah's significant impact. His talent wasn't exactly a secret when he joined Liverpool – he'd scored 35 Serie A goals in two and a half seasons at Fiorentina and then Roma, not an inconsiderable sum against Italian defences – and the £36.9m price tag was actually a club record, despite being lower than many fees paid by other teams that summer. But so much of the media focus initially remained on Coutinho, and whether the Reds could hang on to the player many regarded as their biggest asset.

As it turned out, Liverpool didn't miss the Brazilian at all. Salah was named PFA Player of the Year, scoring an extraordinary 44 goals in all competitions for the Reds that season – a tally surpassed just once in the club's history, by Ian Rush in 1983-84.

Salah's 32 league goals were also a record for a 38-game Premier League campaign – individually, the Egyptian scored more goals than West Brom, Swansea and Huddersfield managed from their entire squads.

"OH, S**T… IT'S TOO EARLY!"

After helping Liverpool past Manchester City into the Champions League semi-finals, Salah struck twice more against his old club Roma in the last four, then travelled to Kyiv to face-off against Real Madrid in the final, hopeful it could be the happiest day of his career.

"It was my dream to win the Champions League when I was young – more than the Premier League," he admits. "The Premier League was always the Liverpool dream, the dream of the city. But when I was young, I always watched the Champions League."

Just when everything was going so well, it all came crashing down when he was forced off the field with a shoulder injury just 31 minutes into the showpiece, after tangling with Madrid captain Sergio Ramos. Salah couldn't hold back the tears.

"That was the worst feeling of my life in football," he explains now. "You'd had an unbelievable season, I scored more than 40 goals, you're in the final of the Champions League and you feel like you're very, very close. The World Cup is also after that, in one month. In that moment, everything comes to your head – you're out of the Champions League, you're injured; for the World Cup you're injured too. It was not the best feeling. But with time, I managed to handle it."

Salah made it to the World Cup but wasn't at peak fitness, and missed Egypt's opening defeat to Uruguay. He scored against both Russia and Saudi Arabia, but the Pharaohs

Clockwise from below One of the Egyptian's two top Reds goals; agony in the Champions League final; Firmino shows off his powers of telekinesis



"YOU'RE OUT OF THE CHAMPIONS LEAGUE AND THE WORLD CUP. IT WAS THE WORST FEELING EVER"

lost all three games on their first appearance at the tournament finals since 1990.

He carried the disappointment of Kyiv with him, using that pain as a driving force for the following campaign. "Yes, it was in my mind," he says. "It was like, 'OK, I lost this year, but I'm going to go next year and do my best to help the team win it'."

After signing a new long-term deal with the club, Salah brilliantly scored the goal that gave Liverpool a 1-0 win over Napoli in their final Champions League group game of 2018-19, narrowly squeezing them through to the knockout stages.

Concussion sustained in a league match at Newcastle meant he had to watch their famous semi-final second leg comeback against Barcelona from the sidelines. With Klopp's side 3-0 down from the first leg at the Camp Nou, the Egyptian wore a T-shirt bearing the phrase 'never give up', hoping to impact his team-mates in another way that night instead. Back for the final against Spurs in Madrid, he was offered the chance to make a rather more direct impact within two minutes of kick-off – stepping up to face Hugo Lloris from the penalty spot, after Moussa Sissoko's handball.

"I always prepare myself before the game, but in that moment we got a penalty and I thought, 'Oh, s**t... it's too early, it's too early to have a penalty!'" he laughs now. "But I didn't want to think negatively. I was just thinking, 'You're going to score, it's going to be fine', so I just scored and the match became easier after that. They were a tough team to play against, but we won."

Salah will never forget that moment of victory, raising both arms aloft in sheer joy as the final whistle blew. "Finally, we won the Champions League – I think it was the first time for each one of us in the team," he says. "It was an unbelievable moment. I'd always wanted to win it one day, so it was something special, especially because the year before you lost it.

"My career has always been like that. I don't want to say up and down, but there's always something to challenge me – to lose the final, and I also came to the Premier League [with Chelsea] and didn't play that much. I left, then came back to play here again. My life in football has always been like that."





HALF AN INCH FROM HISTORY

Even that season, the one in which he'd achieved his boyhood dream, there was an agonising moment that fuelled Salah for another year to come.

It came on his return to the Etihad and the setting for one of his favourite Liverpool goals, this time at the opposite end of the field. Liverpool topped the Premier League in early January 2019, seven points clear of City, when they travelled to face the reigning champions. Eighteen minutes into the game, with the score 0-0, Salah neatly exchanged passes with Roberto Firmino, before playing Sadio Mané in on goal. After the Senegalese forward's shot struck the base of an upright, some slapstick defending led to John Stones booting his clearance straight into Ederson, sending the ball spinning towards goal. Just as Salah raced towards it to tap in if required, Stones hooked the ball off the line, somehow directing it through the Egyptian's legs to safety. It looked to everyone like the ball had already crossed the line when Stones made his clearance, but the goal decision system showed it hadn't – by 1.12 centimetres.

"It was so close," says Salah, still rewinding that moment in his mind for probably the millionth time. "I remember it well. I passed to Sadio, he shot, then Stones cleared the ball – but I was sure it was in, because I was running, I was really close and didn't put my foot in 100 per cent. I still put it in, but in my mind it was a goal.

"Then afterwards, I saw it was really, really tight," he says, holding his thumb and index finger close together to illustrate the agony. "But it was what it was. We had to take it." ▶



"SALAH'S AMBITIONS ARE HIGH – BUT HIS ATTITUDE IS HIGHER"

Salah has been Liverpool's top scorer for five successive seasons, but Reds assistant Pep Lijnders says there's so much more to the Egyptian than goals

"Mo Salah is so much more than a 'striker' for us. Our game stimulates this development and forces it to be that way, as everyone is responsible for everything.

At the same time, he's become more and more of a playmaker as well. He's a gifted finisher – his imagination and intuition in those moments is brilliant. The way that he can keep the ball in the toughest situations and find a way to come out and score is what identifies him. Many players have that, but few have it consistently; if you do, you're part of the world's best, because it's all about the mentality to never give less.

In the most influential matches, he's everywhere to be found. For me though, bigger than the achievement of his goals, it's his everyday presence inside our club. His character is very special, he's a true example to everyone, and that's what makes Mo such a great player. There's no bigger compliment in life. The best ones stay humble and are true examples.

He invests a huge amount of time in his preparations and treats his body well – we've seen him grow as a professional. His ambitions are high, but his attitude in training is higher. If there's one secret in life, that would be the one.

He's true to himself, and he has true peace of mind too. That really helps him, and he's always ready to assist others. I still believe what you are as a person is far more important than what you are as a player."



Liverpool lost that game 2-1 – their only league defeat of the season – and missed out on the title to City by a point. Had Salah beaten Stones to that ball, or had Stones' clearance ricocheted off him into the net, they'd have surely got the draw that secured them the club's first league championship since 1990, as the new Invincibles. Instead, they'd lost out on their dream by the barest of margins, despite winning their last nine matches of the season and amassing 97 points – then the third-highest points total in Premier League history. How's your luck?

Salah responded in the way he always has – the next season, he went again, and didn't stop until he'd extinguished any memory of that close call by helping Liverpool dominate the title race from the start.

This time when they faced a Manchester giant in January, they were 13 points clear, having won 20 and lost none of their opening 21 league matches – their only draw coming in a game Salah missed through injury. When Manchester United visited Anfield, Liverpool led 1-0 in front of a raucous crowd, before Salah raced clear in the final minute to seal victory, celebrating by ripping his shirt off to display his bare chest in front of the Kop (below). It was his first goal against United.

"That United game when I scored the second goal, that was my favourite moment that season," he says. "That year we had the confidence that, OK, the year before we'd done everything that was possible to win it. We lost only one game, so everybody was confident that we could go again and we could do it, because we'd got 97 points. We'd done a really good job to finish that season and try to win it, but we couldn't, so the year after we were more confident we could do it. And we did."

This time, Liverpool got 99 points. Having also lifted the Super Cup and their first ever Club World Cup, long-awaited Premier League glory was confirmed when Manchester City lost at Chelsea, with a month of the season still remaining. The squad famously gathered in front of a giant screen at Formby Hall to watch the historic moment together.

"I think I was the only one who didn't want City to lose!" Salah laughs now. "I wanted us to win it in a game ourselves, because there were still a few left. I wanted us to win the game and then celebrate. But it was a great moment anyway – everybody was so happy."

"I WAS NEVER LAZY AT CHELSEA"

If 2020-21 went far from ideally for Liverpool – a major injury crisis ended their hopes of retaining the title early on – Salah himself scored 31 times in all competitions, his best tally since that stellar 44-goal debut season.

This season he stepped it up again, netting 15 goals in his first 12 appearances, including that stunning solo effort against Manchester City, plus a hat-trick in Liverpool's 5-0 triumph at Manchester United. That afternoon, Salah became the first Reds player ever to score in 10 successive games, and the first opposition player to bag a Premier League treble at Old Trafford. The last person to achieve that feat in any competition was his boyhood idol Ronaldo, for Real Madrid in the Champions League in 2003. The Brazilian himself has joined the long list of Salah admirers in recent times, declaring: "I love him, he's an incredible player." Those words meant something to Salah.

"Of course... I'm a big fan of *his*!" he beams, emphasising that last word, and still wide-eyed that the 2002 World Cup winner enjoys his own brand of stardust. "He was one of the players who really made me love football – he was magic, one of the best ever. I met him once, we didn't talk much, but he's unbelievable.

"For me to score a hat-trick at Old Trafford was unbelievable, too. To be the first player in the Premier League to score a hat-trick there was something special because Liverpool and Manchester United are always like *this*..." he adds, banging his fists together to indicate fierce rivalry.

Salah's use of that word 'unbelievable' says much about the dream he's been living for five years now – a dream so good that it's been hard to take it all in sometimes, even if he insisted at the start of this interview that he foresaw many of the great things that have happened since he joined the club.

His time as a Liverpool player couldn't have been more of a contrast with that unhappy spell at Chelsea earlier in his career, when a move to the Premier League from Swiss side Basel didn't work out. Salah was signed during Jose Mourinho's time in charge, but barely used by the Portuguese boss – he started just six league games for the Blues, one of them ironically being the 2-0 victory at Anfield when Steven Gerrard's slip went a long way to denying Liverpool the title under Brendan Rodgers in 2014.

THE TOP 10

Salah has already joined Liverpool's all-time leading scorers – with an even better strike rate than Merseyside deity Ian Rush

	Goals	Games	Goals per game
Ian Rush	346	660	0.52
Roger Hunt	285	492	0.58
Gordon Hodgson	241	377	0.64
Billy Liddell	228	534	0.43
Steven Gerrard	186	710	0.26
Robbie Fowler	183	369	0.50
Kenny Dalglish	172	515	0.33
Michael Owen	158	297	0.53
Mo Salah	153	240	0.64
Harry Chambers	151	339	0.45

Figures correct to April 4

Above Mo goes 1.12cm from title triumph in 2019











Did Salah almost need the setback of his time at Chelsea to make him the player he is today? "I think so," he says, after briefly pondering the question. "I mean, when I look back, I was young and I learned a lot. That was one of the most important periods of my life – I saw what I needed to do to improve myself, what I needed to do to compete with everyone at that level. I didn't play that much and I was disappointed, very disappointed – I'm a player who wants to play and be on the pitch all the time.

"I didn't regret anything, any decision, and you can ask anyone there – I was always there before training in the gym, after training doing shooting and stuff like that. I was never being lazy or something, but it took a lot of thinking at that time, about what I could do to improve, what I could do to be at that level. That's why I decided I needed to leave England at that moment, so I left for two and a half years. Then I came back..."

Salah returned to the Premier League a different player, and a different man. Every time he takes to the field, he has no doubts about his talent. "I'm confident," he insists. "I love playing football – this is the thing I do and I enjoy it. There's always pressure, but that's normal because you play at the top level and you want to win things, both for the team and individually. There is pressure, but with time you can handle that more."

Salah is relentless in his expectations of himself. You don't deliver as consistently as he has over the last five years without having that kind of mentality.

"During my career, I've learned a lot of things – about how to be more in the game, mentally and physically," he says. "For me, every single game is very important – nothing changes from big game to small game. All of them are big for me, because in all of them you have to win the three points, or if you're playing in the Champions League, you have to qualify. I prepare myself very well for every game. That helps me a lot."

"IN MY MIND, I ALWAYS PICK MYSELF AS THE BEST PLAYER IN THE WORLD – NO ONE ELSE"

Clockwise from top Salah's Old Trafford hat-trick will live long in Red memory; "And we all get winners' medals, right?"; Mo's favourite trophy

THE QUEST FOR THE BALLON D'OR

By early April this season, that mentality had brought him 28 goals, already topping his tally from the campaigns that delivered Champions League and Premier League glory. His 20 league goals had put him head and shoulders above everyone else in the division's scoring charts, making him the hottest of hot favourites to win the PFA Player of the Year prize for a second time. This season more than ever, many have started to view him as the best player in the world.

Asked what the secret has been to his goalscoring form this term, though, and he's adamant it's nothing specific. "There's no secret!" he chuckles. "I think I've been the team's top scorer for the last five years, and I'm always trying to help us win – not only with my goals, but also my number of assists are really high, compared with anyone else in my position in the Premier League," he makes a point of adding. On the day we talk, only Trent Alexander-Arnold can boast more than the Egyptian's 10 Premier League assists this season.

But Salah doesn't shy away from his ambition to do something no player from an Arab country has ever done: win the Ballon d'Or. "Yeah," he says. "Of course it means a lot to win it. One of my purposes in life is to change the people, especially in my country, an Arab country – so that they can achieve what they want to achieve. Those things give them more belief in themselves, that they can do whatever they want."

So far, Salah is yet to top his fifth-placed finish in the Ballon d'Or rankings following Champions League glory in 2019 – many were surprised that he finished just seventh in the voting in 2021. This year, he's been vying with Karim Benzema and Robert Lewandowski for top spot – Lionel Messi's underwhelming goals tally for Paris Saint-Germain makes him unlikely to retain the award, and *France Football*'s decision to hold this year's gala before the World Cup, only including events up to and including July, means there's likely to be a greater emphasis on club football.

Asked whether he currently views himself as the best player in the world, Salah doesn't need long to think.

"In my mind, yes, I'm always saying that," he admits. "I will never say, 'Yeah, I'm better than this person or I'm better than that guy,' no, but in my own mind I'm always choosing myself as the best – I don't choose anybody ▸



Mo is wearing the Salah Squadra training range, created by Adidas

other than me. It's always opinion, though. I respect all other players."

He's full of respect, too, for the legends who have gone before him at Liverpool, even if he's been putting their records under threat. In September, Salah became the fastest ever to reach 100 top-flight goals for the club, achieving the feat in only 151 appearances, beating a mark previously set by the late Roger Hunt. "The records mean something special to me," admits Salah. "Since I came here, I've always been trying to win games for the team, win trophies, and of course, score goals. Every record you break, I feel good. I put a lot of work into it for that. It's something I'm proud of."

This season the Egyptian has also moved into Liverpool's top 10 scorers of all time. "That feels great, and hopefully before I go, I will be the first one," he says with a smile. It's quite a target, given he's on 153 as we talk today, and Ian Rush's record stands at an incredible 346. That's a lot of goals...

"Yeah, it is!" he laughs. "I don't know how many games they used to play at that time, but how many goals he used to score... more than 300, it's quite tough to get. But let's see."

Salah turns 30 in June, but the days of that milestone being the start of a footballer's decline are long gone. The previous four Ballon d'Or winners have been Cristiano Ronaldo at 32, Luka Modric at 33, then Messi at 32 and 34. Lewandowski is still going as strong as ever at 33; a 40-year-old Zlatan Ibrahimovic has still been netting in Serie A.

"I didn't think about the fact I'm going to turn 30," smiles Salah. "I ask some players and they say it's a different feeling when you turn 30, but I don't know, I'm feeling fine. I'm enjoying life, I'm enjoying football – it doesn't matter how old you are now.

"Now you can see that with players – all of them extend their careers. You can see the top, top players always after 32, 33, you can see a lot of them – Lewandowski, Benzema, Messi, Ronaldo, Zlatan, a lot of players; also [Edin] Dzeko in Italy, [Olivier] Giroud.

"All of them perform really well after 30, so I'm not concerned about that."

PARROT FAN CLUB

Salah has been in negotiations with Liverpool for some time now over an extension to his existing contract, scheduled to expire at the end of next season. PSG, Real Madrid and Barcelona have all been linked, in case an agreement to stay at Anfield isn't reached. As we talk in early April, there's still no news on a resolution.

"THE FANS KNOW WHAT I WANT – THE CONTRACT ISN'T ALL ABOUT MONEY"

His ambition to chase down Ian Rush's Liverpool goalscoring record makes it clear to everyone where his heart lies – that he wants to stay at the club for as long as possible. As good as he is, even Salah is unlikely to score nearly 200 goals in the next 13 months.

But asked whether he's confident he will indeed stay at Liverpool for a few years yet, he's unable to give us a definitive answer.

"I don't know, I have one year left," he says. "I think the fans know what I want, but in the contract it's not everything about the money at all. So I don't know, I can't tell you exactly. I have one year left and the fans know what I want."

As he's said publicly before, he reiterates that, in an ideal world, his ambition has always been to stay. "Yeah," he says. "This club means a lot to me – I've enjoyed my football here more than anywhere, I gave the club everything and everybody saw that. I'm always trying to help the team, I've had a lot of unbelievable moments here winning trophies, individual goals, individual trophies. I feel it's like a family here."

He insists he's never been worried either, about the possibility of going into the last year of his deal with his future unresolved. "I'm not worried, I don't let myself worry about something," he says. "The season hasn't finished yet, so let's finish the season in the best possible way – that's the most important thing. Then in the final year we're going to see what's going to happen. But I don't know, I don't think about that a lot. I'm just trying to enjoy the football, trying to enjoy the season and that's it."

During the myriad newspaper articles that have been written during these contract negotiations, speculation even circulated that other clubs might try to make a move for him this summer. Given that he's always had a contract for the 2022-23 campaign, new deal or not, he's always been fully expecting to be with Liverpool next term.

"Yeah. Er, I think so?" he says, sounding surprised that it had even been speculated about. "But if they want me to go, that's something different!" he says, with a laugh that suggests he's not entirely serious. Just like Salah has always wanted to remain at Liverpool, the club have long since made it clear they want to keep him – after everything he's achieved, that's no surprise to anyone.

The bond between Salah and Liverpool has become so strong that whenever the ▶



Below Salah is determined to break Rush's all-time goal record



"WATCHING SALAH EVERY WEEK IS A PRIVILEGE"

Matt Ladson from *This Is Anfield* explains what the Egyptian King means to Liverpool lovers who watch him every week...

Liverpool fans have been privileged to watch some of the finest footballers in the world grace the Anfield turf but, arguably for the first time in history, the best player on the planet now plays for the Reds.

For exactly that reason, watching Mo Salah has been an honour for Kopites – we know that this player and these times are a luxury to be enjoyed. Just like we appreciated some of the greats of the game playing for the opposition, now we know how much it means to have this opportunity in front of our eyes each week.

When Salah is truly on his game, twisting and turning the opposition left-back, you can feel the appreciation and anticipation from the Anfield stands. When he collects the ball in that pocket just on the edge of the box and starts another jinking dribble into the area, the mind instantly gives flashbacks to similar goals, of which there are now plenty, most notably against Manchester City, Spurs, Everton and Arsenal.

When he collects the ball deeper and starts running at back-tracking defenders, darting into space down the wing, you recall such Champions League nights as Roma and City away – and his celebration, both arms outstretched, after his dinked goal at the Etihad in 2018, now immortalised as part of a mural of Salah on Anfield Road (above).

Salah might not be remembered as the Reds' greatest ever player – that debate will probably always be between King Kenny and Steven Gerrard – but in terms of consistency and contribution to the club, he should be at the very top of the conversation.

Perhaps only once he leaves can his legacy be truly evaluated and put into perspective. We're witnessing a true football great here.



Egyptian does depart Anfield – potentially a moment that's still many years away – he already knows he'll feel deeply sad to leave.

"Yeah, of course," he says. "To play in that atmosphere and see the fans always behind me – I have banners in the stadium, two or three, and they're always singing my song, so it's going to be a really sad moment."

It's not only Reds fans who sing Salah's song – head over to YouTube and you'll find Liverpool-supporting parrots singing it, too. "Mo Salah, Mo Salah, Mo Salah, running down the wing, Salaaaaaaaaaaaaah, the Egyptian king," the exotic bird chirps, to the tune of *Sit Down* by indie band James, who clearly have quite the psittacine following.

Salah has already delivered five trophies to the parrots and the people of Liverpool – after the Premier League, Champions League, Super Cup and Club World Cup, he tasted victory in his first Wembley final in February when helping Klopp's side defeat Chelsea to lift the League Cup.

"Lifting that first trophy in the middle of the season was great – it showed us there's a few more things more to win," he says, talking ahead of Liverpool's FA Cup semi-final with Manchester City, and the closing stages of both the Premier League and Champions League. "Hopefully we can get the three. If not, then at least the Premier League and the Champions League."

At least? "At least!" he laughs, jokingly doubling down on his assessment that winning only the League Cup, league title and a second European crown wouldn't be his idea of the perfect season, but it would probably have to do. It gives you an insight into the mentality of the man, and the reason he's progressed to become arguably

"YOU'VE GOT TO BE GREEDY, IN A GOOD WAY. YOU WANT TO WIN A TROPHY, LIKE THIS IS YOUR RIGHT"

the best player on the planet. Winning the Premier League and Champions League once was already pretty impressive. Winning them again, whenever that might be, would cement his greatness. Salah is determined to make it happen, this year if possible.

"Yeah, winning them both again would make me win the Ballon d'Or, so..." he says, before that beaming smile breaks out, and he interrupts himself mid-sentence with a laugh.

No matter how much success Salah has already had, it will never be enough. "It's a hunger," he explains. "I want to win them two, three, four times. Why not? It's a dream for everybody, you can dream whatever you want to, and you can achieve whatever you want to achieve. It's my dream to win the Premier League three or four times because a football player's career is short, between 15 and 20 years maybe, some players less.

"You just need to achieve everything, you have to be greedy – I mean greedy in a good way, like you want to win that trophy, like this is your right. It depends what you want to achieve, what you decide. I always decide




Above "Our Morecambe and Wise tribute act is coming along" **Top** En route to League Cup glory

in my mind that I want to win the Premier League and the Champions League again and again, as it's an unbelievable feeling. Winning both is unbelievable."

There's that word again. Yet Salah believed from day one at Liverpool that he could win those trophies – he promised his friends as much, then made it a reality. Since he walked back into English football five years ago with a point to prove and a pair of slippers on his feet, Salah has had no shortage of Cinderella moments. If he gets his wish, this fairytale has plenty more chapters ahead.

MORE ON FOURFOURTWO.COM

- Why do so many people underrate Salah? *(by Matt Ladson)*
- Quiz: Can you name every club Salah has scored against for Liverpool?
- Ballon d'Or 2022 power rankings: Who will win the award? *(by Mark White)*


乐天堂
FUN88
NEWCASTLE UNITED



PLAY LIKE ALMIRON

Newcastle is a city that appreciates hard work, and Miguel Almiron's graft, endeavour and enthusiasm bought him a rare commodity in football: time. Four years after arriving on Tyneside, the Paraguayan winger is flying – and it has nothing to do with Jack Grealish...

Interview Andrew Murray

Miguel Almiron wouldn't be anywhere without Neil Stoker.

Newcastle United's Paraguayan forward hadn't scored more than four goals in a single Premier League season before 2022-23. Away at Spurs in October, Almiron struck his sixth of the campaign to seal a 2-1 victory. In doing so, however, he split his left boot down the middle from the laces to the toe. He went straight to Stoker – part of the club furniture for 33 years as a steward first and since 2000 as the kit man – desperate to extend the life of his wheels and his own stunning form.

"My lucky football boots had opened up like a sandwich," Almiron tells *FFT*, drawing an invisible line down his foot. He still sounds a little distressed even now, sat opposite us in mid-January at the club's mid-upgrade Darsley Park training ground.

"I told Neily that he had to do something because I'd scored again! He's a genius – somehow he stuck it back together with glue and they're still going strong. I just hope they'll last me the season. Then I'll sign them and give them to him as a present."

The following day, Stoker's temporary handiwork shone again. Picking up the ball just inside the Leicester half, 71 minutes into Newcastle's League Cup quarter-final, Almiron sped forward and slid a delicious through-ball inside Marc Albrighton to set up Joelinton, who cemented the Magpies' first cup semi-final berth since 2004-05.

That Newcastle have also spent much of the league campaign in the Champions League places is down to Almiron's bravura performances. The winger scored nine goals in his first 16 Premier League games of the season, with a staggering volley against Fulham in October starting a run of seven in as many games, which also delivered Goal of the Month and Player of the Month gongs. Last term, he netted just once.

Newcastle are similarly transformed since 12 months ago, blossoming from relegation near-certainties into top four potentials, with Almiron arguably the Premier League's most fearsome wide attacker. Relaxed, charming and talkative throughout our hour chatting in Spanish, the 28-year-old couldn't be more different to the shy, unassuming winger who had hitherto struggled...

How would you sum up the season so far?
Like a dream. I've been scoring goals, the team's playing well, and we've spent a lot of time in the Champions League places. We expected a better campaign than last, but we weren't expecting to be fighting up near the top of the table. We just need to keep working hard – you can always give more.

Is securing Champions League football a realistic goal for the club this season?
Oof, that would be beautiful. As a kid I dreamt about playing in Europe, and the Champions League is a huge part of that. To do that with Newcastle, the club which





"MUM SAID THAT IF I DIDN'T GO TO TRAINING, I'D HAVE TO WORK WITH HER AT THE SUPERMARKET"

has opened the doors to Europe for me, would make that dream a reality. We've also had a really good run in the League Cup and want that progress to continue.

What has Eddie Howe changed?
He gives me more freedom. Having his trust has given me much more confidence and thankfully the goals are now coming. The coach is always hammering home to me to work on my finishing, and I stay late to work on that with my left foot and my crosses with my right. From the beginning, the gaffer has demanded better numbers from every player.

When did you see the changes last season?
You could see the team's improvement as soon as the new coach arrived, and then we

Top Wor Miggy has found the net more often thanks to Howe hounding him **Above** A stellar strike against Fulham gave Almiron a boost

brought in Bruno Guimaraes, Kieran Trippier and others. We stayed up fairly quickly after that. Training sessions are so dynamic and high-energy – the gaffer demands we always train to our maximum and keep nothing back in any session. We train how we play and games are an extension of training. That's the biggest difference since the boss came in.

Did it worry you to be sat on the bench for the first few months of Howe's reign?
I wouldn't say 'worried'. Every player wants to start and feel important to the team, but that's football – I also understood that the team was playing well and competition for places was very high. I enjoyed the challenge and focused on taking advantage when my chance came against Crystal Palace in April. I scored [in a 1-0 win that all but guaranteed survival] and began to start more matches. Goals are important to my confidence and the more I score, the more I help the team, whose support has been amazing.

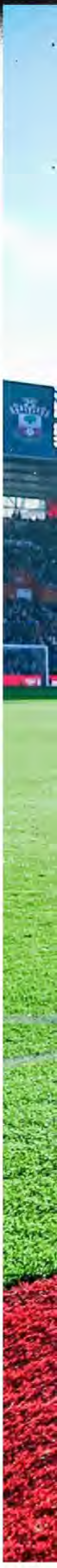
What were you thinking as the ball fell out of the sky for your spectacular volley at Fulham, which won Premier League Goal of the Month?
It all started before the volley. The first thing I did was look up for Bruno in the middle to give him the ball, then run into space, which is something we train constantly throughout the week. Bruno gave it back to me in the air and, honestly, I wasn't thinking anything beyond hitting it towards the far post. It was beautiful. You can't imagine the confidence that goal gave me. When you've got players like Bruno by your side, players who are at another level, the game suddenly becomes a lot easier. You begin to commit each other's movements to memory.

Have you ever scored a better goal?
Oof, I don't know. There was one I scored for Lanus in our massive local derby against Banfield in 2016. In the last minute, I got the ball on the halfway line, ran all the way to goal and gave the goalkeeper a *sombrerito* – a little chip over his head. That goal was really important for the derby and went a long way to us winning the Argentine title that year. That's an amazing achievement for Lanus – a good club, an organised club, but not a Boca or a River Plate in Argentina.

It's a ritual under Howe that each squad member must stand up and tell their life story. Has it been your turn yet?
[*Laughs*] Not yet, thank God! I've had a quiet, humble life, anyway, so I don't know if there's too much to tell.

Almiron sells himself short. His is a story defined by hard work, sacrifice and pushing past preconceptions about his slight frame.

Raised in the working-class San Pablo neighbourhood of Paraguayan capital Asuncion, Miguel grew up in a modest rented house with his parents, sister, grandparents and uncle – eight people to three bedrooms. His mother, Sonia, worked every shift she could at a local supermarket, while father







Ruben worked 18-hour shifts – and 24 hours at weekends – as a security guard to make ends meet. The first thing their son did when signing for Argentine top-flight side Lanus in 2015 was buy them a house.

Without Sonia and Ruben's support, their son may never have moved on from pushing trolleys around a supermarket car park...

Tell us about your early years.
We didn't have much in the way of luxury. We lived within our means, and life was a bit hand-to-mouth, but we didn't want for anything. My mother worked constantly so they could afford to buy me boots. My father came to training with me whenever he could. My grandfather would always take me if my parents were working. You need a lot of help at that age and even a word's encouragement, to be proud of myself when I wasn't playing, made such a difference.

How much do you owe them?
Everything. When I was 14, I had a trial with Club Nacional but it went no further because they said I was too skinny. My mum arranged a trial at Cerro Porteno, the club our whole family supports, and although they took me on, I didn't play anywhere near as much as I had for Club 3 de Noviembre, my local team from the San Pablo neighbourhood of Asuncion. I was so frustrated that one morning I said, "I'm not going to training." Mum and Dad jumped out of their chairs. They'd never heard me say this about football before and they were very worried. My mum said that if I didn't want to go to football, then I'd go with her to work at the supermarket, collecting trolleys and helping people to take their shopping to their cars. I felt a responsibility to help the family and if football wasn't going to be it, then I wanted to help in other ways. Thanks to my mum persuading me that football was the right path, I carried on. Without that, who knows?

Top The smiling assassin with his partners in crime **Above** "I was really shy and didn't usually talk to anyone"

Were you ever without a football?
Never. I'd put holes in my shoes all of the time because I would kick anything that moved. When I was six, my dad took me to 3 de Noviembre for the first time and I still remember everything about it – the nerves, the smell of the pitch. I even have a picture that my dad took of me that afternoon, look. [*Shows FFT his phone with a grainy image of a tiny Almiron*] I was really shy and didn't usually talk to anyone; I think that's part of the reason why my dad took me to the club.

Is it true that you have a tattoo of River Plate on your back which your mum wasn't too happy about?
Ha, that's right. I've always liked River and when I was 15 I decided to get a tattoo. I knew she would be furious, so I told her at Christmas during *Medianoche* [a meal that starts just before midnight on Christmas Day] when everyone was eating and enjoying themselves. I thought, if everyone's happy, maybe she won't want to ruin Christmas!

You made it into the Cerro first team aged 19, then won the Clausura title in 2013 and Apertura in 2015. What did it mean to lift a trophy for the team you support?
The second title is the one that was really special. I didn't play much in the first, but ▶



in the 2015 Apertura I felt more important. I scored goals and coming from a family of fans meant it added to the pride that we all felt. I'll always be grateful to the club.

How did your transfer to Lanus in August 2015 come about?
As soon as we won that title, Cerro received an offer from Lanus, who were managed by Guillermo Schelotto – now my Paraguay manager. Argentina was always a country I had wanted to play in and I knew that it would be good for my sporting and personal development if I went there. Cerro needed to sell players at the time, and off I went. Again I had to fight to get into the team, but in my second season we won the 2016 Primera Division title and, after scoring that goal in the Clasico del Sur against Banfield, I scored again in the final against San Lorenzo. It was an amazing period.

What made you decide to go to MLS and join Atlanta United?
I wanted to try a different style of football. The MLS is very quick – not as good as the Premier League, but with some of England's dynamism and physical contact. My family loved life in the US and it really helped me to improve my game, especially under the former Barcelona coach, Gerardo Martino, who supported me a lot and is one of the best coaches I've played under. We won the MLS Cup, the first major honour in the club's history. For the city, and for us as players, it was an incredible time. I had a great season [13 goals, 13 assists] and was due to go back for pre-season when Newcastle came calling.

Arriving in England two-thirds of the way through the 2018-19 season, shortly before his 25th birthday, Almiron needed time to settle. Despite coming within the width of the post of scoring on his home debut against Huddersfield, he played in 26 games before opening his Magpies account. Two years later, he endured another 39-match streak without netting for his club. Both times, he ended his drought by notching in a 1-0 home win against Crystal Palace.

Yet the Paraguayan became an immediate cult hero in the North East, thanks to the ceaseless industry, defensive contributions and sheer refusal to quit that defined his play. Banners and tifos from fan group Wor Flags were prominent at St James' Park, and in pre-season he, Bruno Guimaraes and Joelinton recreated a famous photo of Shola Ameobi eating an apple while riding a bike. "I was like, 'Er, OK, but I have no idea what you're talking about – an apple?'" Almiron says, laughing, of the image that went viral among Toon fans. "We did it in one take, too – not bad with one hand on the handlebars!"

The affinity he feels for the fanbase is mutual. When a well-hydrated Jack Grealish celebrated the 2021-22 title by claiming, on camera, that a Manchester City team-mate had been "playing like Almiron" as the champions laboured to a final-day victory over Aston Villa, the Toon Army assembled. Grealish has since apologised profusely – "What a guy; I genuinely hope he keeps scoring," the England man said, adding that he has "so much respect" for Almiron – but "playing like Almiron" in 2022-23 is actually to be the league's most in-form player...

"WOULD I HAVE FOUND THE FORM I HAVE WITHOUT LEARNING FROM ALL THE BAD MOMENTS FIRST?"



How did you deal with the spotlight from the Grealish situation?
That's in the past now. He has since apologised, I've accepted it, and we move on. I'll always be thankful to all the Newcastle fans for their reaction, though, and I really felt their support when we played City at home early this season. I scored that day [in a pulsating 3-3 draw] but let me reiterate: there was no extra motivation. Every player is inspired by different things to play to their best and I've never once thought about things away from football. I just focus on myself and try to do things well.

You seem to live and play with a constant smile. How did you manage to keep smiling during the lengthy spell you went without scoring after joining the club?
Football always makes me happy, even in the tough times. I tried to wrap myself up in family life and knew eventually the light would return. Criticism is part of football. To work hard in silence and enjoy the good times is the only way.

You struck the post on your home debut against Huddersfield. Did you ever think how different things could have been if that shot had gone in?
Yes, all the time, but there's another way of looking at it, too. Would I have found the form I've been in this season if I hadn't learned from all the bad moments? That's when you really learn about yourself; when you become stronger. Football always teaches you something. You win or you learn – you never lose.



How did your partner, Alexia, help?
We've known each other since I was 16 years old and she was 14 – we've shared my journey together. She left home with me to move to Argentina, then the US and now England. We have a young son called Francesco and if things aren't going well for me on the pitch, they're a real source of strength – the perfect way to switch off from football. We love the city; going out for walks or a coffee and exploring with Francesco. You train and travel around a lot in football, so I'm determined to make the most of what time I can spend with him while he grows up.

Had you heard about the film *Goal!* and Santiago Munez before your arrival?
I knew about it, yes – one of my best mates back home told me about it when it looked like the transfer was happening. Hopefully one day I'll achieve some of the good things Santiago did here!

Can you tell us about your relationship with the Newcastle fans?
Since my very first day here, I've always felt the fans' support and I'll be forever grateful. Even during my worst moments, they never stopped cheering. There's never been a time when I haven't felt their warmth. I want to keep on playing well to give something back.

How's your English now?
[*In English, with a passable Geordie twang*] It's f**kin' freezin', man! [*Laughs*] That's an important phrase around here. I understand everything, and my team-mates understand me, but I struggle a little with speaking it in interviews, which makes me pretty nervous. But I'm still studying.

How have you found the rain, wind and snow up here?
I'm used to it. Last June, we went back to Paraguay on holiday to see family. It's winter then, about 12 degrees, and I was wandering around in short sleeves – my friends couldn't believe it. They were wearing massive coats, hats, scarves – the lot. [*FFT*: You didn't fancy going shirtless, then, like Newcastle fans at St James' Park?] Oof, they're so crazy. I was stunned when I saw that for the first time – how can you deal with that?

What advice would you give now to that six-year-old Miggy during your first ever training session?
To persevere and remain patient. That's so important to remember in football, when you're on the bench or when things aren't going for you. Don't lose your head. Keep working hard. Your big moment will always arrive, so be ready to take it.





Clockwise from left Lifting the MLS Cup with Atlanta – their first silverware; good point, well made; "There's an enormous split in this boot, Miggy"; Shola would be proud; just out of shot: Grealish, wincing

WHEY AYE, PARAGUAY!



...and Brazil, Peru and the rest of South America. The Toon love a Latin cult hero



FAUSTINO ASPRILLA
He came, he saw, he was half-cut for his debut. Thinking he wouldn't be involved when Newcastle played Middlesbrough shortly after he signed in February 1996, the Colombian had a glass of wine at lunch. Hours later, he nutmegged a Boro defender with a drag-back and set up an equaliser in a come-from-behind victory.



NOLBERTO SOLANO
Only *Eastenders'* Sonia Jackson can match the Peruvian for setting the cultural zeitgeist with a trumpet. Solano's salsa band The Geordie Latinos were a central part to his hero status in two Tyneside spells, which totalled eight years and took in a 1999 FA Cup Final appearance.



GEORGE ROBLEDO
Born to a Chilean father and English mother, Robledo moved with the family to Brampton, Yorkshire, aged five as a result of political instability back home. Part of the Newcastle team that won FA Cup finals in 1951 and 1952, scoring the clincher in the latter, he was the first non-British-registered Golden Boot winner in English football history.



MIRANDINHA
The first Brazilian to play in English football arrived from Palmeiras in 1987, having recently starred for his country in the Rous Cup. Unveiled to the St James' Park faithful in a magnificent white suit, the Newcastle midfielder got on famously well with Paul Gascoigne and turned on the city's Christmas lights during his first season.



JONAS GUTIERREZ
Magpies fans still love the Argentine for sticking with the club post-relegation in 2009-10, plus the goal and assist in May 2015 that sealed the club's Premier League survival. The rest of us loved the Spider Man mask he'd frequently whip out of his shorts to celebrate scoring.



A BEE ON AN ARROW, AN ELEPHANT VOLUNTEERING FOR THE RED CROSS AND A LION LOOKING FOR A FIGHT



THE 92'S CLUB CRESTS: RANKED



Separating the diabolical badges from luscious logos – where does your side sit in our rundown?

Words Tom Hancock

Football teams never even used to display badges on the front of their shirts, let alone lucrative sponsors. Now, the very DNA of an institution is woven into the fabric of your club (we're talking about the crest, not the generic betting firm logo emblazoned on the middle of the strip).

Like with anything football-related, sides scampered off in a multitude of directions – some prefer to showcase their city's coat of arms or a symbol representative of the location; others' icons have evolved into a simplistic shape surrounding an emblem in the centre. And then there's all creatures great and small, from lions and tigers to the birds and the bees, via horses, hats, pirates and even the depiction of a legendary ex-player.

Each of the 92 has something unique to offer, so let's rattle through the good, the bad and the bonkers of the Premier League and Football League...

92 BURTON ALBION

Burton-on-Trent is known for its beer brewing, though did the football club have to incorporate that quite so literally into their crest? At least the big fella should be difficult to shrug off the ball.

91 HULL CITY

If you've never come across the book *Crap Taxidermy*, check it out – because that's where Hull's badge belongs (and that's before we get on to the fur pattern that's more leopard than tiger).

90 FULHAM

You'd think one of the basics of devising a logo would be to align the letters so people can read them without crooking their neck at a muscle-aching angle, wouldn't you? Well, Fulham didn't think that.

89 CHELTENHAM TOWN

What do you see: a heavily stylised robin, or a giant red fish preparing to gobble up a smaller red fish? Cheltenham's emblem is supposed to represent the former, but we prefer the alternative interpretation.

88 MK DONS

OK, so it's tough for your crest to ooze tradition when you were founded less than 20 years ago, but could MK Dons not have come up with something a bit better than a bargain bin bottle opener?

87 STEVENAGE

It's actually the Hertfordshire Hart, but the focal point of Boro's badge could so easily be a giraffe wearing some novelty antlers. And, hang on a minute, is this not just Brentford's version rehashed?

86 SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY

Why is the owl fluttering its eyelashes? Why are its eyes at a 90-degree angle in the first place? And why are they shaped like a human's eyes!? It's a right old hoot is Wednesday's insignia.



85 BIRMINGHAM CITY

It's a unique badge – we'll give City that – but did anybody bother to double-check the design against a genuine map of the world? Don't use this thing for your geography homework, kids.

84 LINCOLN CITY

"Aaaarrrggghhh, my shin!" Sadly for fans of visual comedy, that's not a tricky winger hobbling in agony after being scythed down; it's the famous Lincoln Imp grotesque seen on the city's cathedral.

83 WEST HAM UNITED

Did you know the shape of West Ham's badge is based on the bow of HMS Warrior, one of the first two armour-plated, iron-hulled warships ever built? Us neither – but yeah, don't go calling it a shield.



82 NORTHAMPTON TOWN

By all means celebrate your 125th birthday, Northampton, but did anybody consider that dipping your icon in gold paint would make it seem like some kind of special edition chocolate coin?

81 CARDIFF CITY

It's no surprise the logo features a dragon – but that's no Welsh dragon; it's oriental, as per the wishes of owner Vincent Tan (who previously sparked rage by changing the kit from blue to red).

80 BRISTOL CITY

That's meant to be a robin – but get closer and it resembles one of those fortune-telling fish impaled on a rod. And why underline the first half of the club's foundation year? Is there a 1994 Bristol City?





79 BRENTFORD

One of the newer members of the roundel rabble, Brentford ditched two bees and a beehive for one monstrous bee and… the bee helmet from the Nic Cage remake of *The Wicker Man*? A bit gruesome.

78 COLCHESTER UNITED

Colchester was the first capital of Roman Britain, so it makes perfect sense that the U's' badge proudly bears the aquila symbol; it's just a pity that the eagle looks like a hastily cobbled together mosaic.

77 MILLWALL

Either Millwall's leaping lion is ready to rip you limb from limb – or it simply wants to give you a big friendly hug and has a funny way of showing it. Can anybody confidently say for sure, though?

76 WALSALL

Terrific, another identikit circular badge with an animal. Use your imagination and it could be a swift blocking a solar eclipse – but we wished more clubs used their own imagination in the first place.

75 CRAWLEY TOWN

A diamond expelling fighter planes, a badge within a badge and – hold up – is that Manchester United mascot Fred the Red? There's way too much going on here; time to simplify, Crawley!

74 WYCOMBE WANDERERS

Buckinghamshire's county emblem has a somewhat confusing history, but Wycombe must have missed the memo on one crucial detail: the swan is supposed to be in the chains, not the other way around…

73 STOKE CITY

The fonts picked here are rather cool, but there's really nothing spectacular about the Potters' current crest – a stark contrast to past incarnations, all of which featured local symbology prominently.

72 NEWPORT COUNTY

Reformed after going bust, the Exiles are the only member of the 92 whose badge displays two foundation dates. As for that shield, do the South Wales outfit have a secret jousting department…?

71 HARTLEPOOL UNITED

In scrapping their previous badge – a red ship's wheel with a ball in the middle – Hartlepool have managed to depict the scene when Harry Potter's Patronus fends off a swarm of Dementors. It's, er, different.

70 STOCKPORT COUNTY

Like fellow fourth tier Manchester outfit Rochdale, Stockport made the controversial decision to roundel-ify their traditional coat of arms trademark. And can anybody honestly say it's better like that?

69 ROCHDALE

In a common case of weirdly specific mythical beings on EFL club badges, Dale's includes eight martlets: swallow-esque footless birds derived from English heraldry. Every day's a school day…

68 READING

Once the home of famed biscuit buffs Huntley & Palmers, Reading was known as 'Biscuit Town' – and, while it looks more decorative, this design could be repurposed to serve the tea-dunking treats.

67 MIDDLESBROUGH

The Teessiders switched things up in 2007 and replaced their circular icon with a shield, though it had the (presumably) unintended effect of turning it into a pub sign. Is the lion on fire, by the way?

66 SALFORD CITY
After taking over the club in 2014, the Class of '92 quickly set about rebranding Salford – and part of that seems to have involved swapping their old logo for a lion inspired by the Emperor from *Star Wars*.

65 BURNLEY
"Hello Burnley, it's your badge designers. We've got a few ideas: A shield? A lion? A bird? Bees... or a hand? Or you can have stairs on it... or a ribbon. What do you think?" "Yep, that all sounds great, ta."

64 ROTHERHAM UNITED
Have you ever seen a windmill give birth to an antique leather football? No? Well, you've obviously never studied the badge of Rotherham (the Millers) closely enough. It's a South Yorkshire miracle!

63 WIGAN ATHLETIC
A popular motif among fans, the 'Tree and Crown' was resurrected in 2008. What sort of tree is that? A mountain ash – known locally as... a 'Wiggin Tree'. You can't beat a good badge backstory, can you?



62 QPR
The Super Hoops' foundation year is clearly shown at the bottom of their badge, but – and we can't tell whether this is intentional or not – it actually appears again, in the club initials. Pretty clever, right?

61 LEICESTER CITY
Now, it's not our place to tell the club who wrote football's finest underdog story how to do anything, but can we point out one tiny thing to the 2015-16 Premier League champs? Foxes aren't yellow!

60 PETERBOROUGH UNITED
Posh's logo bears a pair of Biblical references taken from the town's coat of arms: the keys to heaven and 'Upon this rock' motto – in Matthew 16:18, Peter is the 'rock' upon which Jesus builds his church.

59 SHREWSBURY TOWN
It's a shame they no longer play by a river: Town's trio of 'loggerheads' (leopards) are parched. At least they haven't returned home to find their house on fire, like the poor sod on the Salopians' previous crest.





58 CAMBRIDGE UNITED
You're probably aware that *The Football Factory* isn't really about a football-shaped factory – but the U's show us what that might look like. Could they have made the club initials a little bigger, though?

57 CREWE ALEXANDRA
Sure, the outline shape of Crewe's logo could be less 'Microsoft Word speech bubble', but the Railwaymen manage to strike a decent balance between modern and traditional. All in all, a fairly solid effort.

56 BRIGHTON & HOVE ALBION
Is it conceivable to oversimplify a crest? Albion's would suggest the answer is very much 'Yes'. Even the seagull is subdued; could they not at least have included one of the city's piers?

55 HARROGATE TOWN
There's a certain hypnotic quality to Harrogate's emblem, at the centre of which stands... doors to a different dimension? In any case, it's unique enough to avoid being forgotten as just another roundel.

54 ACCRINGTON STANLEY
No, that's not a harmonica in the middle; it's a cotton shuttle. And no, it's not the eight of clubs underneath; those black shapes are acorns, recalling the town's original name of Akerenton. Very nice.

53 EXETER CITY
City seem to have cloned ancient Greek equine idol Pegasus to give a degree of symmetry to their crest – which also features [checks notes] a lion rising from a knight's helmet, presenting a jar of honey?

52 FLEETWOOD TOWN
The Lancashire town's fishing industry was largely destroyed by the 1960s Cod Wars, but the local football club aren't going to abandon its proud history anytime soon: that's one heck of an anchor.

51 OXFORD UNITED

Quite clearly, that is an ox's head – but something magical happens if you flip Oxford's badge upside down: it's an angry crab… or an owl perched atop a huge croissant… Go on, let your thoughts run wild!

50 FOREST GREEN ROVERS

Contested drop-balls are a thing of the past on the pitch – but not on the Nailsworth club's crest (though neither the lion nor the unicorn are keen on getting particularly stuck in here).

49 ASTON VILLA

They didn't alter much but, aside from losing the iconic 'Prepared' motto, Aston Villa made one key alteration when modernising their badge in 2016: they gave the lion some much-needed claws. Grr.

48 GRIMSBY TOWN

Grimsby used to be home to the world's largest fishing port, so the Mariners (who really play in Cleethorpes) are right to celebrate that heritage on their logo – which is shaped like a ship's hull. Nifty.

47 PORTSMOUTH

They once made do with just the recognisable star and crescent – which still adorns their shirts – but Pompey's powers that be inducted the club into the circular squad by unveiling a roundel in 2018.

46 MANSFIELD TOWN

Ever pondered what prominent-chinned pioneer Jimmy Hill would have looked like were he a stag? What do you mean, 'You're scraping the barrel now, *FFT*'? Well, Town's crest has the answer, anyway…

45 CHARLTON ATHLETIC

Charlton sported a circular insignia before they were trendy (or, given their ubiquity today, while they were trendy). Used almost continuously since 1968, this is among the oldest badges in English football.

44 SHEFFIELD UNITED

Sheffield is the Steel City – and those are two hefty blades on the logo of… the Blades. While not adopted until 1977, the crest was conceived by club legend Jimmy Hagan some 20 years earlier.

43 GILLINGHAM

We're not sure what heinous crime the horse has committed to end up behind bars, but it should be let loose immediately on account of it having an insanely cool mane (tilt your head right).

42 MORECAMBE

Have you ever tried your shrimp with a couple of freshly cut roses? That's apparently on the menu if you pop to the Lancashire coast, though you're probably better off sampling one of their belting pies.



41 BRISTOL ROVERS

Gaffers can have trouble getting their message across – but how many have considered outsourcing training to a sword-wielding pirate like the shadowy seafarer dominating Bristol Rovers' crest?

40 TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR

Spurs' logo has been subjected to a multitude of memes over the years, reduced to a chicken trying to balance on a beach ball – which is a little harsh to be honest, because that's undeniably a football.

39 PLYMOUTH ARGYLE

The Pilgrims are nicknamed so, as Plymouth was the Mayflower's last port of call before departing for the New World. Sure, it's the Mayflower on the badge, but it doesn't look much like sea beneath it.







38 DONCASTER ROVERS

Donny is a Roman town, so you'd be let off for thinking that's a centurion. However, on closer inspection you'll discover it's a Viking – a nod to the fact the longship-sailing Scandinavians also settled in the area.

37 BRADFORD CITY

City's colours of claret and amber, a unique fusion in the 92, will always make them stand out – but just in case that wasn't enough, they can boast a levitating bantam (not a regular chicken) on their logo.

36 WATFORD

It's gone through a few upgrades, but the Hornets' badge has stuck with the same broad design – emphasising the Hertfordshire Hart – since 1978. It's good, but not a patch on the version from '74 to '77.

35 WEST BROMWICH ALBION

The Baggies gave the brand a face-lift in 2006 and did a decent job of it, adding the club's name for the first time and keeping the hawthorn branch-perching thrush (who's cock-a-hoop).

34 LEYTON ORIENT

There are three Welsh sides in the 92, but none of their crests seem as Welsh as Orient's. Those creatures aren't dragons; they're wyverns – two-legged beasts as seen on the City of London coat of arms.

33 CARLISLE UNITED

The Cumbrian's badge-dwelling wyverns appear to have a much tougher job on their, er, claws than Orient's, attempting to prevent the town's medieval castle from collapsing. Hang in there, guys!

32 MANCHESTER CITY

It'd be very easy to call City's logo generic, but the Premier League giant's hallmark since 2016 is a modern take on a design introduced back in the '70s (and it's pretty aesthetically-pleasing, to be fair).

31 SWINDON TOWN

Considering the town is entwined with the history of the Great Western Railway, it's fitting that a steam locomotive takes pride of place on Swindon's gilded crest – which easily won a supporters vote in 2007.

30 PRESTON NORTH END

A symbol visible all over Preston, the lamb on this famous old club's badge represents seventh century bishop St. Wilfrid, the patron saint of the city. And 'PP'? 'Princeps Pacis' – Latin for 'Prince of Peace'.

29 EVERTON

A fairytale castle tower? No, that's Prince Rupert's Tower – an 18th century prison used as an overnight lock-up for drunks. First seen on the logo in 1938, it's indelibly associated with the Toffees' identity.

28 AFC WIMBLEDON

They're a phoenix club, though the reformed Dons' emblem centres on a different bird: the double-headed eagle – an image linked to Julius Caesar, who legend has it once camped on Wimbledon Common.

27 ARSENAL

Twenty years old, the Londoners' 'new' badge has stood the test of time (the fact that this revision adorned the shirts of the 2003-04 'Invincibles' squad will have played a fairly significant part in that...).

26 BLACKPOOL

OK, so it possibly makes some of the details a tad indistinguishable, but there's a lovely hand-painted vibe to this suitably tangerine-infused totem – the tower-boasting Lancashire hotspot's coat of arms.

25 COVENTRY CITY

A phoenix and dove squabbling over a ball that's stuck under an elephant, who's helping the Red Cross while carrying three pepper mills? Coventry's crest is absolute mayhem and we're all here for it.

24 SOUTHAMPTON

Overflowing with local symbolism, Saints', er, saintly badge is a subtly modified version of the 1970s competition-winning design by supporter Rolland Parris. More logos could do with a scarf, we reckon.



23 CRYSTAL PALACE

The great glass structure from which the area takes its name burned down in 1936, but the football club's crest depicts its destruction by giant eagle – which would have been even more dramatic.

22 PORT VALE

Their arch rivals may be called the Potters, but Vale's emblem actually references Stoke-on-Trent's famed industry (and ceramic tycoon Josiah Wedgwood, who was born and died in the Staffordshire city).

21 NORWICH CITY

The Canaries gave their logo a smart restyle prior to the 2022-23 season – and spiffing it is, too. However, we'd be lying if we said we didn't pine for the Bart Simpson lookalike lion from the previous instalment.

20 AFC BOURNEMOUTH

Bournemouth are the only club in the 92 with an ex-player on the badge. The fella heading the ball is legendary striker Dick Dowsett, who helped to shape the Cherries' modern status as commercial boss.

19 CHELSEA

Chelsea are proof that circular logos don't have to be generic and bland. In a nod to the crest they used between 1953 and 1986, the west Londoners restored the regardant heraldic lion for this 2005 redesign.

18 HUDDERSFIELD TOWN

Town's attractive badge honours the club's history and local area in various ways – but we're obsessed with one element: the moody-looking Yorkshire terrier who's definitely not giving you your ball back.

17 LEEDS UNITED

A football-adorned White Rose of York is the star aspect of a simple, classy crest which hasn't changed for more than 20 years (though they threatened to wreck it by proposing an appalling replacement in 2018).

16 SWANSEA CITY

It's a myth that swans can break your arm – but you won't catch us messing with the majestic beast which dominates the Welsh team's updated logo; it's conquered a castle, for goodness sake!

15 SUNDERLAND

The Black Cats' current crest – highlighting local landmarks the Penshaw Monument and Wearmouth Bridge – was introduced alongside the Stadium of Light in 1997, and it's held up well over time.

14 TRANMERE ROVERS

Rovers went retro with their strip for 2021-22, which meant going retro with their badge too. It's a beaut, featuring a subtle battleship-emblazoned football to celebrate Birkenhead's shipbuilding industry.

13 BOLTON WANDERERS

Clean and fresh (even if the disc-shaped 'BWFC' first appeared in 1975), Bolton's logo is instantly recognisable – and since the previously unravelled ribbon was re-tied in 2013, it's back to its very best.

12 IPSWICH TOWN

Has a horse ever seemed more like it's about to score a worldie? It's not any old nag either; it's a Suffolk Punch, which designer John Gammage hailed as "a noble animal, well-suited to dominate [the badge]".

11 DERBY COUNTY

All kinds of critters monopolise the crests of Premier League and EFL sides – including plenty of lions – but we think Derby's typically pugnacious-looking ram is the meanest of the bunch. No words needed.

10 SUTTON UNITED

You're never too far away from a bird-enhanced logo among the Premier League or EFL, but surely the award for avian excellence on a crest goes to Sutton and their cute green parakeet. Aww, bless it.

09 LUTON TOWN

Knight's helmets are ten a penny atop badges, less so boater hats – but hat-making is Luton heritage, and that nice touch complements the adapted version of the Bedfordshire town's motif beautifully.



08 BLACKBURN ROVERS

Accentuating the mighty Red Rose of Lancaster, nestled in what resembles a presentation box embossed with the Riversiders' Latin motto, this is certainly a logo worthy of Premier League champions.

07 MANCHESTER UNITED

The badge hasn't been significantly revamped since 1973, when the club added the synonymous red devil – and why should it have been when it's arguably the most familiar emblem in the world game?

06 LIVERPOOL

The shirt carries a simpler variant, but the full crest is quite beautiful – incorporating Anfield's Shankly Gates and a pair of eternal flames to forever honour the 97 victims of the 1989 Hillsborough disaster.

05 NEWCASTLE UNITED

A classic black and white shield supported by two robust seahorses, topped off with a lion popping out of a turret, the Tynesiders' trademark is one of the most distinctive ever to grace the Premier League.

04 BARNSLEY

The glassblower and miner have done a grand old job assembling the badge within a badge on the Tykes' ace totem. Hopefully that incongruous-looking dragon isn't about to turn everything to ash.

03 BARROW

Can you spot the pun on Barrow's emblem? Well, there's a bee... on an arrow... You've got it now, haven't you? The submarine represents the Cumbrian port town's shipbuilding heritage. Splendid stuff.

02 WOLVERHAMPTON WANDERERS

Wolves are the only top-flight outfit without any letters on their logo. And it doesn't need any; this is an enduringly iconic design leaving you in no doubt as to whose kit it belongs to.

01 NOTTINGHAM FOREST

The tree, the font, the funkiness – archetypal in its simplicity, Forest's crest is stunning proof that sometimes less is more. There's a reason it's barely been altered since its debut almost half a century ago. Art.



LIFE WAS BETTER IN BLACK AND WHITE

Alessandro Del Piero made himself an icon of late ’90s football in the world’s best league, then lifted the 2006 World Cup in an explosive summer for both club and country. The man himself relives his bumpy ride with *FFT*: scandals, Jagger and all

Words Jonathan Holloway


DEL PIERO
10
ROSSI

"I HAD THE WORLD ON MY SHOULDERS. DID I FEEL SORRY TREZEGUET MISSED HIS SPOT-KICK? NO, I WAS DELIGHTED"

Two months after winning the World Cup, Alessandro Del Piero experienced a humbling reality check. It was September 9, and the mighty Juventus had just drawn 1-1 against 10-man Rimini in front of 10,000 supporters on the Adriatic coast. Kicking off his new campaign in the second tier of Italian football, a 31-year-old Del Piero – a serial winner of seven major trophies by then, including the Champions League – could be forgiven for wondering what kind of alternative universe he'd found himself in.

In the space of a few months, one of the biggest scandals in football history had rocked the game to its core, Italy had become world champions and Del Piero's beloved Juve were condemned to Serie B. Paradoxically, the lowest point in the attacker's storied career followed his greatest achievement by a matter of five days.

"There was certainly bewilderment and disbelief at what was happening, but the World Cup made everything more distant, right from the first days of training with the national team in Coverciano," Del Piero, now 47 and happily enjoying retirement, tells *FFT*. "I had a goal with my national team-mates – and nothing could distract me."

Such steely resilience becomes a theme throughout an hour in the Italian's company. Scandal, height issues, final heartache and injury agony have given Del Piero enough obstacles to hurdle but, every time, he had the last laugh...

PAINT IT, BLUE

Del Piero wasn't alone in his curious summer of 2006 – fellow Juventus stalwarts Gianluigi Buffon and Mauro Camoranesi were also involved in a national squad full of optimism heading to Germany for the World Cup. In May, the *Calciopoli* scandal of referee rigging had erupted around them, bringing the Old Lady into disrepute alongside Milan, Lazio, Fiorentina and Reggina. But if anything, that ugly episode served only to bring a tight-knit group closer together.

"From the very beginning we believed that we had a chance of winning," says Del Piero. "We flew under the radar without saying anything. But to tell you the truth, game by game, we found even more conviction and more belief. Our confidence grew day after day because we were a united, compact team – everyone was ready to give something for the group. In the end, we felt unbeatable. And we were..."

Such confidence wasn't unfounded: Italy hadn't been beaten since October 2004, and dismantled Germany 4-1 just three months before their first match of the tournament. Two Group E victories and a 1-1 draw took the Azzurri into the last 16, then wins against Australia and Ukraine set up a semi-final showdown with the hosts. Again, Italy got the better of Germany – only this time when it really mattered. After 90 goalless minutes, Del Piero added to Fabio Grosso's late extra-time opener by ghosting into the box and curling a fine strike beyond Jens Lehmann.

"There's nothing like it," he grins 16 years on. "You can't think of anything else – it's almost impossible to sleep, you just have that goal in mind. Despite the enormous tension, it was a joyful wait [to score in the 119th and 120th minutes]. I'll say it again: we felt unbeatable and wanted to prove it."

Del Piero had plenty to prove. Italy had lost to final opponents France when they last made a major tournament showpiece, Del Piero's Juve team-mate David Trezeguet's golden goal bettering the Azzurri in Euro 2000's historic denouement. Six years later the two juggernauts squared off once more, this time matching each other through 120 minutes. Instead of destroying Del Piero for a second time, Trezeguet struck his shootout spot-kick against the bar. Del Piero scored Italy's fourth, setting up Grosso to convert a dramatic clincher.

"That walk from centre circle to penalty spot was the longest of my life – it wasn't even the first time I'd taken one in a final," he says. "But this was different – here I had my whole story on my shoulders, and the whole world was watching me; especially my country. Did I feel sorry for Trezeguet? Honestly, no, I was delighted. Sure, I'd have preferred it to be someone else's mistake and not David's, but at that moment there's not too much time for feelings."

Three days later, a weird summer got weirder when the music lover appeared on stage in Milan with one of the greatest bands of all time. The Rolling Stones were covering the White Stripes' *Seven Nation Army*, complete with alternative lyrics for a victorious nation. "Mick Jagger and the Stones were playing at San Siro and called



Below On top of the world with the Azzurri against France



me on stage," chuckles Del Piero. "I don't really know how it happened, but certainly there was a bond – Jagger is a huge fan of Italy and our football."

That 2006 World Cup triumph may be the greatest in his career, but it's impossible to mention Del Piero's name and not instantly think of Juventus. The club's all-time leading goalscorer wore the famous black and white for 19 years, scoring 290 goals in 705 games. But rather than a heroic rise through their youth ranks, his journey to stardom began as a 13-year-old at Serie B outfit Padova.

"When I started playing football, I was the shyest and the smallest, and so it was for years," he recalls. "I used to play everywhere – I played so much with my brother Stefano that my father invented a lighting system to let us play late into the evening! I've always had passion, ever since I was a little kid. The difficult thing was leaving home for the first time at 13 years old, though I wasn't chasing success back in those days – just the desire to play and make my dream come true. First only football, and only passion."

Padova deserve credit for taking on a small, unassuming Del Piero in the hope his physical growth would match his development as a player. The trequartista never made it past 5ft 9in but what he lacked in size, he made up for in skill, determination and smarts. Del Piero only made a handful of appearances for Padova, but that was enough to convince

Top to bottom UEFA Cup defeat to Parma in '95; *Pinturicchio* with his Rafael; "Can I accompany you to Boro, Fabrizio?"







Juve honorary president Giampiero Boniperti to part with a few billion lire. A legendary former diminutive striker himself, Boniperti would later see many of his Juventus records topple at Del Piero's nimble feet. Barely old enough to drive, the latter made a leap from bit-part second tier player to mixing it with world-class talent before his 18th birthday.

"In Turin, I was embarking on not only the best future I could dream of, but I was also joining my favourite team," says Del Piero. "I will always be really grateful to president Boniperti, who unfortunately is no longer with us. He took me to Turin, starting my story in black and white – I don't think I can put into words what I felt then. I wasn't prepared for the fame, but I didn't suffer because of it – mainly because I've always put the game above everything else.

"In those early years, even after the first few goals or even the first Scudetto, I wasn't overwhelmed by the popularity – I was naive and didn't worry about it too much. I thought about playing, scoring and winning. The rest never affected me – I was living my dream."

THE DIVINE APPRENTICE

It didn't take long for that to manifest in reality. The first goal of Del Piero's Juventus career arrived in just his second substitute appearance for the Old Lady; on for Fabrizio Ravanelli in the 80th minute, he rounded off the scoring in Juve's 4-0 September 1993 win over Reggiana within 60 seconds. Six months later, his third start produced a hat-trick against a Parma side packing Zola, Asprilla and Brolin at the other end.

With Roberto Baggio, Gianluca Vialli and Ravanelli for competition, becoming a first-team regular at Stadio delle Alpi was never going to be easy for a 19-year-old Del Piero. The summer of '94 proved a turning point and began the teenager's life as a first-team fixture for years to come.

He watched from home as Italian hearts were broken in the 1994 World Cup Final, seeing club-mate Baggio blast his spot-kick into the stratosphere to hand Brazil victory. Del Piero began 1994-95 in Juve's first team under new boss Marcello Lippi, but quickly assumed bigger responsibilities when Baggio suffered a long-term injury that November. The apprentice didn't disappoint – earning the nickname *Pinturicchio*, as the emerging artist to Baggio's renaissance master Rafael – and played a pivotal role in Juve's league and cup double-winning campaign. It could have been a treble, had they not fluffed their lines against Parma in the UEFA Cup final.

Twelve months later, Del Piero started up front alongside Vialli and Ravanelli in Rome, as Juve became European champions for the second time. It remains their last.

"It will always be an unforgettable moment of my career, as that cup meant everything to us," he says. "The final at Stadio Olimpico in Rome, only Juventus colours in the stands, and finally European champions once again. It was an extraordinary ride in my first ever Champions League season."

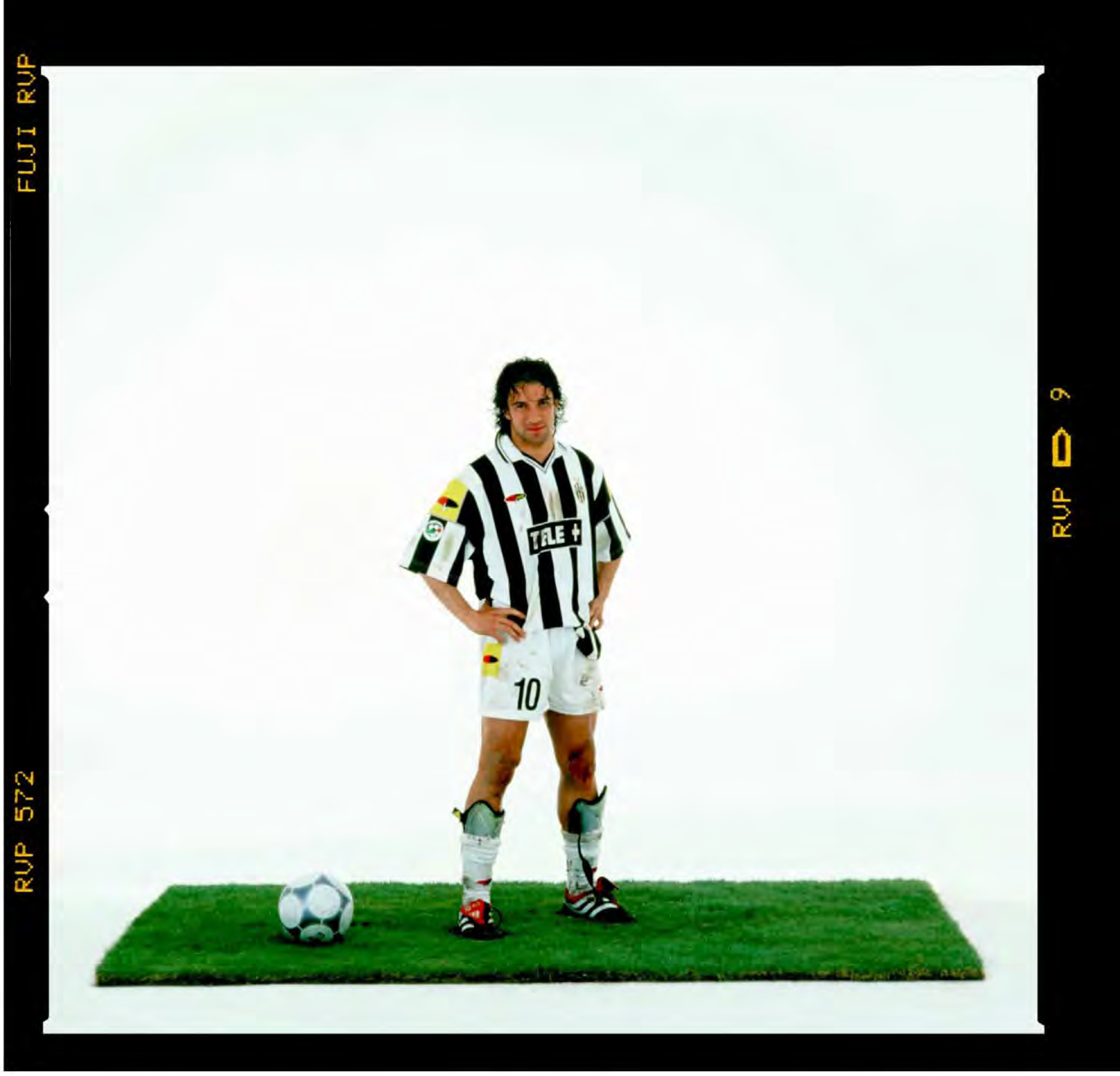
Del Piero had inherited the No.10 shirt from a departed Baggio and scored six goals en route to the final, including a crucial free-kick which levelled their quarter-final tie against Real Madrid. After the Old Lady beat surprise package Nantes in the semis, the final went to penalties after a draw with Ajax. Pencilled in as the fifth taker, Del Piero was eventually spared the responsibility of scoring. "I would have taken it like I always have," he smiles, "but I was delighted to be able to dedicate myself only to celebrating!

"In my time at Juventus, we had several brilliant performances in Europe. If we count the UEFA Cup final in 1994, we reached four consecutive finals, and then another in 2003. Maybe it was destiny that it would go like this. But with the finals, even the lost ones, I can't complain about how things went."

In particular, 1998 was an emotional roller-coaster for Del Piero. In a calendar year that can be split into two distinct and contrasting parts, the 23-year-old ended the 1997-98 campaign with 32 goals in all competitions, the Scudetto and Serie A's Italian Footballer of the Year award. With another Champions League final and his first World Cup to look forward to that summer, he would have been among the favourites for the Ballon d'Or had things gone to plan.

Juve followed 1997's Champions League final woe with a repeat against Real Madrid in Amsterdam, before Italy lost their World Cup quarter-final shootout to hosts France. That November, a season-ending knee injury sustained against Udinese meant a gruelling mental and physical battle in a 10-month recovery. Pace, sharpness, agility – vital to his footballing make-up – hung in the balance.

"I think I would have done the same thing, stretching out to take a shot – I could never have foreseen that ending," he tells *FFT*. "In any case, you don't play thinking about the possible negative consequences of your efforts, otherwise you'd be blocked mentally. ▶



"It was another stage on my road which has had many curves and climbs. Perhaps it was even more beautiful that way. Back then, obviously I was distraught, but I got up immediately and thought about how to return – how to react by using all that anger to become even stronger. Today, I can say that I grew up in that moment, almost like a transition from boy to man. I didn't want to stand still. I always tried to evolve, because I never thought the talent I was gifted with would just be enough. I was demanding of myself – it was one of the fundamentals of my entire career."

A new Del Piero emerged. A more tactically minded and mature player, compensating for his absence of speed with breathtaking skill and influence over team-mates. Over the next few years, Juve reaped the benefits of his second coming, enjoying more assists than ever from their talisman. However, one aspect of his game remained a constant throughout. Perfecting the art of cutting in from the left and scoring worldies with his right, the 'Zona Del Piero' – as monikered by Italian media – proved terrifying territory for years. Coupled with a similarly lethal set-piece record, this potent attribute became as synonymous with his game as the No.10 shirt and stripes. With apologies to mirror image Arjen Robben, Alex got there first.

"There's a lot of instinct involved, but also a lot of training," explains Del Piero. "I played a role in Juventus' attack which often led me to be in that position, off-centre at the edge of the penalty area. Goal after goal, I gained more confidence and perfected that move, repeating it even during the week in training. I'm happy that it's become a trademark."

SCANDAL AND DECEIT

Players are ultimately responsible for how a game unfolds on the pitch, but off it, deep in boardrooms where football's great secrets are whispered and protected, egos and self-conceit sometimes rule.

While Del Piero & Co were winning trophies, phone taps investigating accusations of doping at Juve unearthed unexpected and explosive details of an altogether different scandal. In 2006, conversations between club officials at some of Italy's top teams and refereeing officials revealed details of wide-ranging potential match-fixing behind the scenes. Claims of refs being pressured to favour certain sides left Serie A more exposed than a filthy flasher; investigations went on for years, resulting in convictions, acquittals and several long-term bans.

For Juventus, *Calciopoli* stripped them of their 2005 and 2006 crowns, as they were demoted to Serie B and handed a nine-point deduction. Of all the clubs sanctioned, theirs was the most severe. An inevitable exodus ensued that summer, with Fabio Cannavaro, Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Patrick Vieira, Emerson, Gianluca Zambrotta and Lilian Thuram all departing. But the fans knew they could rely on their captain.

"From the first day I made it my duty not to speak, but to do," says Del Piero. "For me,





'doing' meant staying at Juve and bringing her back to the top where she deserved to be. That was what mattered – and only that. I never thought about going anywhere else, I never looked into any offer that came in for me. I had no doubts, not even for a moment. That I can say with certainty."

By this point, Del Piero had already peaked. Becoming a world champion had realised his lifelong dream and put to rest any demons of the past at international level.

"At Euro 96, it was already a lot to be called up for my first major international event with the senior team," he continues. "Everybody wants to play more if possible, but even then the same rule has always stayed with me: for that blue shirt you do everything. Every loss leaves its mark, though – I'm not one of those who could ignore them. I carry them all with me: the disappointments, the lost endings, even the mistakes. I can say I'm privileged to have won a lot of things in my career, but some of that was also because I knew defeat. I always thought there was another match after, another chance to get up again with even more strength.

"The South Korea loss at the 2002 World Cup leaves bad memories, because it was a very strong team – not so different from the one that won the World Cup in Germany four years later. There are many regrets about that tournament, where we never actually played well. That doesn't mean the refereeing against Korea was up to scratch [giving the co-hosts a penalty, disallowing an Italian golden goal and sending off Francesco Totti], but we should have won anyway."

Del Piero used every inch of his experience and leadership to haul Juve out of the 2006 doldrums. Celebrating a title-winning Serie B season as the league's top scorer, he followed that feat by bagging Serie A's *Capocannoniere* prize as the Old Lady marked their first year back by finishing third.

"I had nothing to prove, but there was certainly a drive and desire for revenge that drove me for all the years after 2006," says Del Piero. "I focused like never before on the training, on the details, on my role within the team. I knew I still had so much to give, and I proved it. I lived every day after relegation to Serie B with the thought of winning and lifting another cup again."

That wait lasted longer than expected: amid finishes of 2nd, 7th and 7th, Juve blew any hopes of winning the Europa League in 2009-10 after somehow squandering a 4-1 aggregate lead over Fulham in the last 16. For Del Piero, it was the roughest experience in a varied history against British clubs that took him from Ibrox to Anfield.

"The defeat at Craven Cottage, a wonderful stadium, was the biggest disappointment in the Europa League because we had the next round in our grasp," he laments. "My best memories [against British clubs] are linked to Old Trafford, though, for the great rivalry with that wonderful Manchester United team in the '90s – for the goals scored in that ground, and for the standing ovation the crowd gave me at the end of a friendly.

"I had the great fortune of playing in both England and Scotland. For many years, until the opening of the Juventus Stadium I'd say, you had to go there to find that atmosphere – maybe there was only Genoa's Stadio Luigi Ferraris in Italy."

It took until 2011-12 for Juve to end Inter's dominance, thanks to an unbeaten season under Antonio Conte – in Del Piero's final campaign at the club. "Before we'd officially won the Scudetto, I didn't think of anything other than that," he says. "We wanted to lift that trophy so badly – maybe me most of all, because I knew what we'd experienced in previous years and I knew that afterwards I'd be gone. I reflected on my own situation later, but I really had no idea how it would go – I didn't want to think about it. I lived day after day almost in a bubble waiting for that last game. In the end, everything was perfect. Deep down, I realised that moment wasn't mine alone, because it belonged to the people. It was those fans who gave me an unforgettable day."

Del Piero played on for another two and a half years. First came an adventure Down Under with Sydney FC, before a sojourn in India drew the curtain on a superb career.

"At the end, the question was, 'Where can I live differently from where I've spent almost two decades of my career, almost entirely in the same shirt?'" he says. "Not better or worse, but different. And the choice fell on Australia. Today, I'd do it again, because it was a great life experience which I still remember with great pleasure. Retiring was a decision as natural as it was complicated. There's no doubt that it's a very traumatic moment, to stop doing something you love so much and that was so all-encompassing in your life. I don't think it applies only to us players. But there comes a time when you understand that you must turn the page."

One of the best players to have never plied his trade in the Premier League, Del Piero has fond memories of fixtures in the UK. That's not to say the chance didn't present itself from time to time, with Celtic among several clubs hoping to lure him after he'd revealed his decision to leave Italy.

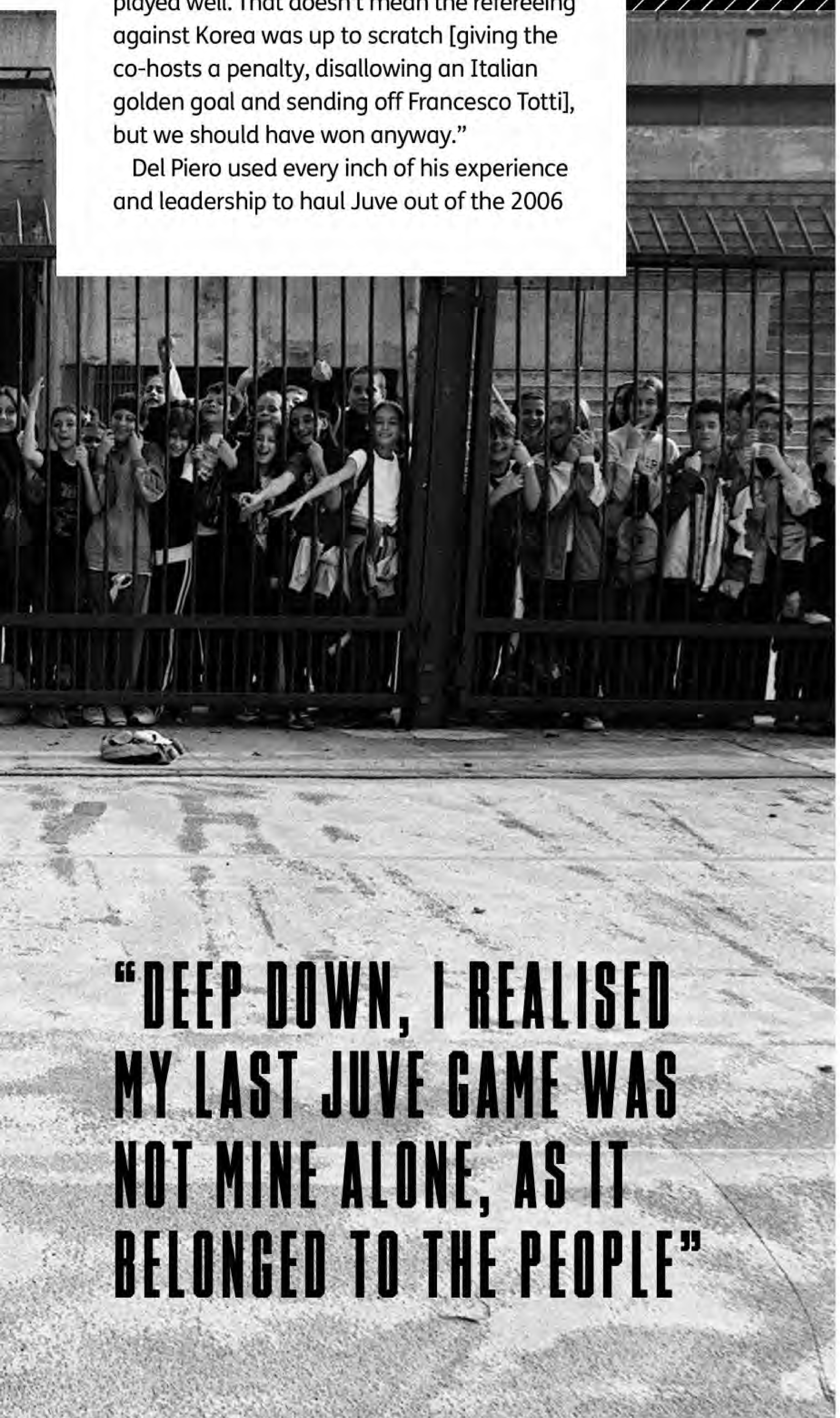
"I would have liked the opportunity to join a British club, but nothing was stronger than the desire to stay at Juventus," he says of his prime years. "There was a possibility at Celtic after leaving Juve, but I'd already decided to change everything: change football and my life, so I went to Australia."

Before *FFT*'s interview concludes, there's one question left: any regrets? True to form, Del Piero's answer comes with the grace and humility he exuded on the pitch for 23 years.

"If I participated in a television quiz on the theme of 'Alessandro Del Piero goals', I think I would win!" he laughs. "I remember them all, even with all the details. I'm so grateful for everything I experienced that I'd honestly consider it unfair to have regrets. Apart from one – I'd like to play again..."

He may be 47 now, but we bet Alessandro could still do a job. You have been warned.

Clockwise from above The 2012 Scudetto; Turin's hero; "You know the Italian for full-kit w**ker?"



"DEEP DOWN, I REALISED MY LAST JUVE GAME WAS NOT MINE ALONE, AS IT BELONGED TO THE PEOPLE"

THE 40 BEST FOOTBALL VIDEO GAMES EVER!

Sports gaming has come on leaps and bounds since Atari brought us *Pong* way back in 1972 – *FFT* ranks the finest football titles that have surfaced since then, featuring referee dashes, Kebab Shop FC, a balletic Tony Popovic and the much-loved Tonton Zola Moukoko

Words Ben Wilson



40 PES 2021: SEASON UPDATE

The end of an era. Before the disastrous launch of *eFootball 2022*, Konami afforded *Pro Evolution Soccer* one last hurrah. Alas, this reskin of *PES 2020* couldn't recapture the excitement of the series' PlayStation 2 heyday, but some cerebral attacking play and accurate likenesses still made for an entertaining swansong.

BEST BIT A goodbye to the hallowed Master League mode, in which you slowly upgraded a team of pathetic no-hopers into a trophy-hoarding monopoly.

39 FIFA MANAGER 11

The other half of gaming's big two nudges into our top 40 rundown under a forgotten guise. Way before Ultimate Team became omnipresent, EA dabbled in a bit of dugout simulation with some curious results. This edition incorporated the proper *FIFA* engine for the first time, though strategic options dwarfed anything previously witnessed in that console series.

BEST BIT Seeing your interactions with the squad affect morale – and sometimes cause a media stir.

38 EURO BOSS

A cheapo 1991 release that could be found down your local newsagent, this Amstrad management sim featured a novel wrinkle. In addition to building a squad to dominate the new European Super League, you had to finance and construct an all-seater stadium within two seasons or face the axe. Brutal.

BEST BIT Straightforward text-based match commentary, relying on your imagination to fill in the gaps.

37 NASL SOCCER

The North American Soccer League's official game is this list's oldest, dating back to 1980 on Mattel's Intellivision console. *NASL Soccer*'s side-scrolling action could only incorporate six footballers on the pitch at any one time, but even so this represented a huge upgrade from epochal-but-rudimentary table-tennis pastime *Pong*.

BEST BIT The crowd roaring each time you found the onion bag. Seriously state-of-the-art 42 years ago.







36 MULTI-PLAYER SOCCER MANAGER

Another glorious throwback to the Amstrad and ZX Spectrum, *MPSM* allowed you to take over a Division Four club with 30 seasons in which to ascend the divisions. Its hook was hosting up to four bosses on one computer, tussling for strikers and league positions.

BEST BIT Switching to your brother's team, selling you his star man and insisting it was an accident for 30 years.

35 FOOTBALL, TACTICS & GLORY

The closest thing to digital Subbuteo. You take it in turns to move, shoot, pass or tackle, with player stats affected by weather and fatigue. An active community enables you to import most major leagues and teams, and the PS4 and XBox One versions play just as well as the PC original.

BEST BIT Boshing in a 25-yarder, despite all of the in-game numbers being against you.

34 EUROPEAN CLUB SOCCER

An enjoyable Mega Drive kickabout featuring chunky sprites haring around a large pitch: in the pre-*FIFA* days this felt like interacting with a real match on the telly. Intriguingly it lacked a shoot button: instead you held down B (pass) or C (lob) to add extra power to the ball. Curious, but the method worked.

BEST BIT Rotherham appearing among the European elite, owing to it being developer Krisalis' hometown club.

33 LMA MANAGER

The first great dugout sim on console. While *Championship Manager* nailed text-based action, *LMA* on PS1 was all about the visuals: from 3D matches to cup draws with old blokes plucking balls from bags. Released in 1999, the series endured through to 2007.

BEST BIT Picking a lowly club and reshaping your squad before a ball had been kicked.

32 MICROPROSE SOCCER

Norwich supporter Jon Hare is a development legend for making *Sensible Soccer* – but that classic would never have existed without this 1988 effort. Hare's first crack at virtual footy set the foundations for *Sensi* via a top-down perspective, some simple controls and crazy banana shots.

BEST BIT Letting fly from 35 yards on the left side of the pitch, then directing the ball into the right-hand top corner.

31 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP SOCCER 2

If *MicroProse* was a forerunner to *Sensi*, this was its underappreciated spin-off – made by Hare and his crew while working for Sega in secret. Their experiment to flip the *Sensible Soccer* engine sideways scored zero fanfare back in 1994, though it has since turned into a cult hit.

BEST BIT Developer Wallace Poulter's 2013 confession that the England squad's names came from his days studying at Fens School in Hartlepool.

30 CHAMPIONSHIP MANAGER

The all-conquering *Football Manager* series originally went under a different name. This first entry, lovingly nicknamed 'ChampMan', emerged on Amiga in 1992 and transformed dugout sims, with every player given a rating out of 10 after each match. This was already common practice in newspaper reports, but revolutionary in gaming.

BEST BIT Selecting your team by clicking on a rectangular box next to each player's name: a mechanic which soon became synonymous with the series.

29 FOOTBALL MANAGER HANDHELD

By 2006 'ChampMan' had become *Football Manager*, and this PSP release fulfilled the most geeky of fantasies – playing *FM* while on-the-go. Options were limited compared to the full-fat PC version, but sealing a key transfer on the bus/train/khazi felt revelatory at the time.

BEST BIT Snapping up a teenage Barcelona prospect, then building your team around him for 15 seasons. His name? Lionel Messi.

28 FIFA STREET

How good are real pros at four-a-side? This PS2 game helped us to find out while pulling off balletic skills using David Beckham, Thierry Henry and… Tony Popovic. Fans lobbied for years to have it added to the main EA series, which finally inspired *FIFA 20*'s Volta mode.

BEST BIT Lining up as Brazil with Dida in goal, Roberto Carlos at the back, and a Ronaldinho-Ronaldo frontline. Unbeatable.

27 SUPER SOCCER

Super Nintendo's early years were surprisingly short on playable football games. This was the best of a mediocre pile, offering a unique camera angle based at one end of the pitch – making it advantageous to attack the closer, and therefore larger, goal.

BEST BIT Getting back from school and diving straight into a penalty shootout with a mate. Then another. Then another…

26 TOP ELEVEN

Social-media addiction switched to a whole new level in 2010 thanks to Serbian studio Nordeus. *Top Eleven* included all the classic elements of a management game, yet was playable against mates through Facebook. More than a decade later it's on mobile too, and still going strong.

BEST BIT Nordeus recruiting Jose Mourinho as the face of the franchise, enabling you to challenge the man himself in friendlies.



25 FOOTBALL MANAGER 2014

A decade after losing the ChampMan name, *FM* continued to obliterate all of its rivals. This edition showcased a giant leap forward in the matchday engine, a revamped news model, individual player testimonials and ingenious system of sharing your tactics, kits and entire player databases via Steam.

BEST BIT Being able to loan a player back to the club from which you bought him, clearing the way to forge a Chelsea-like farm system for young talents.

24 PREMIER MANAGER

Football Manager's long-forgotten adversary, introduced on the Amiga in 1992 and later to have a fairly successful Mega Drive run. Much of what it offered feels pretty familiar now, but the option to see four different matches unfold on a single screen was innovative and cool back then.

BEST BIT Dialling up 781560 on the in-game telephone, which immediately boosted your players' stats to 99 and granted £20 million to spend. Sneaky.



THIS ARCADE FAVOURITE BOLDLY WENT WHERE NO PRECURSOR HAD DARED, UTILISING 3D GRAPHICS

23 VIRTUA STRIKER

This arcade favourite boldly went where no precursor had dared, utilising 3D graphics for its player models. Dribbling was nigh-on impossible, but you seldom gave a hoot after hammering home in the final minute to earn yourself another match. Gamecube sequel *Virtua Striker 2002* is also noteworthy for its hilarious team made up of characters from *Sonic The Hedgehog*.

BEST BIT The intuitive three-button control scheme, where pressing 'long ball' triggered a cross into the penalty box if your player was near the touchline.

22 FIFA 09

EA's Ultimate Team mode is the most popular – and polarising – mode in gaming, and this is the title that launched it. Rather than being included in the box, it was a £7.99 download – and the first step towards building a dream team was creating yourself, as club captain.

BEST BIT The Collection – a virtual Panini-style sticker book in which you got rewards for finishing individual teams and leagues.

21 MARIO STRIKERS CHARGED FOOTBALL

In Nintendo Wii's first online game, power-ups (Bananas! Red shells!) were redistributed over pitches on lava pits and icy wastelands. The ensuing action – using a metallic ball – was as jovially larger-than-life as it sounds.

BEST BIT The tough-yet-fun Against All Odds challenge, whch pit Bowser Jr against his evil dad without the use of power-ups.

20 WORLD CUP 98

EA were on fire in PS1's early years. *FIFA 98: Road To World Cup* gave us every single team who'd tried to qualify (172 in total), then the tournament's official game provided all the correct fixtures in the correct French stadia – and 15 classic ties, including the 1966 final.

BEST BIT Being able to trigger an intentional foul with one tap of L1 – especially when the referee didn't spot it.







THE WII'S FIRST ONLINE GAME FEATURED LAVA PITS, ICY WASTELANDS AND A METALLIC BALL

19 ULTIMATE SOCCER MANAGER

Initially released as a demo in which you only controlled Brighton, *USM* blended traditional managerial elements with nefarious options like offering bungs and rigging matches. You could end up being sacked if the FA got wind.

BEST BIT Capturing the feel of '90s football by having tables in teletext, and your fixture list attached to a clipboard.

18 EMLYN HUGHES INTERNATIONAL SOCCER

Most of the 1980s efforts on this list are management sims. This one smashed the mould, bringing momentum-based movement and five-directional passing and shooting to joystick-focused football. It remained in the charts for three years, and was later named the 44th best game ever on the Commodore 64.

BEST BIT The novelty of playing a full season, managing injuries along the way.

17 NEW STAR SOCCER

Create-a-player sim that started on Windows in 2003, but is best known on mobile. Control key moments by using your finger to aim the ball, with RPG elements keeping you hooked – such as new boots to boost power.

BEST BIT Developer Simon Read picking up a BAFTA in 2013, after the game amassed 2.1 million downloads in a year.

16 FIFA INTERNATIONAL SOCCER

The arrival of sports gaming's most lucrative series. The must-have Mega Drive cartridge of Christmas '93 adopted an isometric view, with an incredible array of player animations and nations (78!) to play as. The year's big seller, despite coming out on December 15.

BEST BIT Follow-up *FIFA 94* offered a laugh out loud twist: running away from the ref for as long as you liked, to escape being booked.

15 FOOTBALL MANAGER 2022

Any *Football Manager* edition from the past 10 years could have occupied this spot, but we've decided to roll with the most recent – the series' lone shortcoming is that each new release renders the previous one redundant. Notable additions to the current title include Transfer Deadline Days that go hour by hour. Essential, as per.

BEST BIT Snatching a filthy 88th-minute win with your only shot on target.

14 KICK OFF

We're nearing Hall Of Fame territory now, as we move into the business end of our top 40. Italo-British creator Dino Dini mastered the birds-eye view first introduced by *MicroProse Soccer*, then improved on that rival by having the ball kicked ahead of players, rather than being stuck to their feet. Fast, addictive and historic gameplay.



BEST BIT Getting to know which refs would dish out red cards and which would let some tactical fouling go – *Kick Off* featured a dozen officials in total.

13 ACTUA SOCCER

Before *Pro Evo* rattled *FIFA*'s cage, this 1996 offering from Sheffield studio Gremlin – with Wednesday players Chris Woods and Andy Sinton on motion capture – took number one slot in the purists' eyes for its 3D visuals, slick match engine and iconic commentary from the legendary Barry Davies. It sold a million copies and spawned two sequels.

BEST BIT Undoubtedly the commentary and Bazza's entirely unsympathetic deadpanning. "Oh no. The striker's going through a bit of a lean spell at the moment." Leave the poor guy alone, Barry.

12 PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 3

The sim which firmed up Konami's reputation as guardians of 'real' football, and made '*PES* vs *FIFA*' as heated a rivalry as Spurs-Arsenal. Touch-perfect controls, realistic ball physics, intelligent team-mate play and immaculate passing all felt dreamy, while Master League made heroes of fictional players like Valeny, Castolo and Espimas.

BEST BIT Inimitable referee Pierluigi Collina being on the cover – despite not appearing anywhere in the game.

11 FOOTBALL MANAGER

The second oldest game in the list (after *NASL Soccer*) isn't related to the modern series by Sports Interactive. Buying and selling players, building a squad, watching match highlights (even if the players were stick men!), swearing at the injustice of an unmerited last-minute equaliser: this 1982 delight from Kevin Toms invented the genre.

BEST BIT Finally earning your first promotion – no matter which team you picked, you had to start out in English Division Four.







EA MOTION-CAPTURED 22 PLAYERS TOGETHER FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE *FIFA* STARTED



10 CHAMPIONSHIP MANAGER 97/98

From the original *FM*, to the legendary series it inspired. This update to *CM2* was crammed with an extensive set of professional leagues across nine different nations, creating a true 'world of football' vibe when it came to team selection and signing new players. Even more groundbreaking was its data editor, enabling you to manipulate existing player stats and add youth stars – or yourself.

BEST BIT Barricading the bedroom door and then doing a 'Crowded House': four seasons in one day.

09 INTERNATIONAL SUPERSTAR SOCCER DELUXE

While SNES' best football game is considered the daddy of *Pro Evo*, the two were made by different Konami studios. Still, the *ISS* blend of long punts, slide-tackles and thumping shots are fondly remembered, as are player likenesses: despite fake names, Valderrama, Ravanelli and Letchkov were unmistakeable.

BEST BIT The most histrionic commentary of any football game ever. "Down the wing!! It's a biiiig kick!!!"

08 FIFA 22

Pay-to-win complaints make the latest *FIFA* controversial, but on the pitch it's never been better. EA could now motion-capture all 22 players together for the first time, ensuring intelligent team-mate AI, improved keepers and physical aerial duels. Plus Ultimate Team remains epic, as long as you're able to keep your wallet locked away.

BEST BIT The inclusion of league-specific Ultimate Team Heroes like Joe Cole (Premier League), Fernando Morientes (La Liga) and David Ginola (Ligue 1).

07 KICK OFF 2

Dino Dini's second try at top-down football expanded on the 1988 original with several tournament modes and four different types of playing surface – how Luton fans rejoiced (presumably) at seeing their plastic pitch in video game form. Still revered, to the point that its annual World Cup was broadcast on German TV in 2019.

BEST BIT Loading in your own team from a different game – Dini's separate tactical sim, *Player Manager*.

06 ISS PRO EVOLUTION

The PS1 title which cemented Konami's shift away from the arcade mode of *International Superstar Soccer* and towards *PES*' mid-2000s authenticity. Some deft passing and intricate build-up play was a welcome replacement to the kick and rush of old, 3D players appeared real instead of cartoony, and shooting mixed subtlety and power.

BEST BIT Recycling possession near the edge of the penalty area to fashion an opportunity – truly groundbreaking at the time.

05 SENSIBLE SOCCER

Pacy, relentlessly addictive top-down action which felt like all the best bits of *Kick Off* and *MicroProse Soccer* put together. Tiny players charged around the pitch launching snappy passes and physics-defying shots – and after initially wowing Amiga and Atari owners in 1992, its console debut triggered the maiden major digital rivalry, with *FIFA*.

BEST BIT Playing as fictional teams such as Kebab Shop – with a frontline of Fresh Chillies, Cheeseburger and Small Doner.



04 ROCKET LEAGUE

'Football' played out in customisable vehicles on futuristic pitches with boost pads? Well... yes. This online favourite is still going strong – vehicles include KITT from Knight Rider and Ghostbusters' ECTO-1.

BEST BIT Timing the jump just right to 'head' home a rebound off a side-wall, while driving a Jurassic Park Jeep Wrangler.

03 CHAMPIONSHIP MANAGER 01/02

The suit-and-tie (or Matalan coat) sim which perfectly bridged the gap between depth and speed. Scouting, transfers, tactics and games all felt detailed, yet you could breeze through entire seasons in days. And the wonderkids! Cherno Samba and Tonton Zola Moukoko had indifferent real-life careers, but remain idols of the ChampMan era.

BEST BIT Winning the league with Samba, Moukoko, Mark Kerr and Mike Duff – and still crowing about it 20 years later.

02 PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 4/5/6

Three outstanding games for the price of one here – there's just no way to split this PS2 trio. From 2004-06, Konami mastered the sense that you were controlling real pros, and also made 'Option files' – saves which let you add correct names and kits – the hottest words in gaming. So long, Merseyside Blue.

BEST BIT Every match across an unsurpassed three-year period.



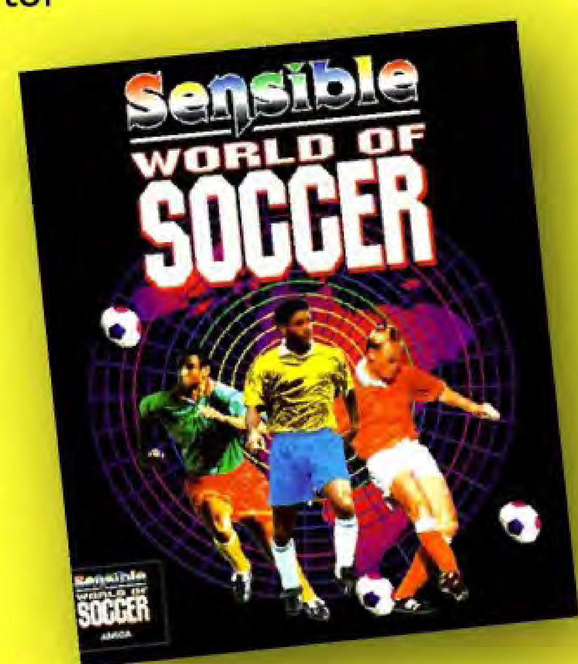
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SENSIBLE WORLD OF SOCCER

Most pre-2010 releases on this list haven't aged well. The master of football gaming, however, remains as responsive, speedy, and untouchable as it was when released in December 1994.

While *Sensi* is recalled fondly for its peerless on-field excellence, creator Jon Hare's ambition was to design a truly magnificent management game – and he got that right, too. *SWOS* boasted 70 countries, 1,500 teams and 27,000 players. You felt part of a global footballing landscape, half a decade before *Championship Manager* evoked similar emotions.



Yet it's the eye-in-the-sky action which keeps it supreme. Football is a sport where joy turns to agony in an instant, and *SWOS* captures that knife-edge balance like no other. Every single fixture is a breathless, not-over-'til-it's-over cup final. Spectacular strikes, last-ditch tackles and superhuman saves are embedded in its DNA. Little wonder it's still widely emulated, and home to an annual World Cup tournament – in 2020, Poland's Blazej Bembnista won it for the sixth year running.

There are additional aspects to its legend. The theme song '*Goalscoringsuperstarhero*' inspired an official music video, while Hare's team made an exclusive demo for *Amiga Action* magazine in which alien teams battled on a grey pitch covered in craters. Its name? *Sensible World Of Moon Soccer*.

In 2007, Stanford University hailed the 10 most influential games of all time, featuring icons like *Tetris* and *Doom*. *Sensible World Of Soccer* was the only sports sim on the list, as well as the only European game, full stop. A remarkable achievement considering that Hare's original design was scrawled in biro on seven pages of paper.

BEST BIT The fact that you can still play it, free of charge, thanks to the tireless efforts of community fan site sensiblesoccer.de.

THE 50 GREATEST PLAYERS EVER!

A World Cup, Messi's triumph and Pele's passing prompted discussion aplenty about the finest footballers ever to play the beautiful game – now, *FFT* presents to you our definitive ranking. Don't agree? Of course you don't! **Tell us at #FFT50**

Words Chris Flanagan, Andrew Murray, Mark White, Jon Spurling, Michael Yokhin, Alex Hess, Alex Reid, Declan Warrington, Seb Stafford-Bloor, Marcus Alves

ROBERT LEWANDOWSKI • DIDI • GIANLUIGI BUFFON

GUNTER NETZER • PAOLO ROSSI • KYLIAN MBAPPE

KENNY DALGLISH • MICHAEL LAUDRUP • BOBBY MOORE

PACO GENTO • LUIS SUAREZ • ROMARIO • MATTHIAS SINDELAR

VALENTINO MAZZOLA • STANLEY MATTHEWS • RIVALDO

RAYMOND KOPA • LOTHAR MATTHAUS • SOCRATES

MANUEL NEUER • RUUD GULLIT • THIERRY HENRY

LUKA MODRIC • ROBERTO BAGGIO • CARLOS ALBERTO

FRANCO BARESI • ANDRES INIESTA • XAVI • LEV YASHIN

RONALDINHO • GIUSEPPE MEAZZA • PAOLO MALDINI

BOBBY CHARLTON • GARRINCHA • EUSEBIO • ZICO

MARCO VAN BASTEN • MICHEL PLATINI • FERENC PUSKAS

GERD MULLER • GEORGE BEST • RONALDO • ALFREDO DI STEFANO

FRANZ BECKENBAUER • ZINEDINE ZIDANE • JOHAN CRUYFF

CRISTIANO RONALDO • DIEGO MARADONA • PELE • LIONEL MESSI



"PASS ME MY PHONE NOW!" #FT50

50 ROBERT LEWANDOWSKI

But for a pesky Icelandic volcano and its ash cloud preventing the Pole from flying to England, Lewandowski might have signed for Sam Allardyce's Blackburn in 2010. Instead, he joined Dortmund, fired them to two Bundesliga titles, scored 344 goals in 375 games for Bayern Munich and now bangs them in for Barcelona. Good work, Eyjafjallajokull.
Career highlight Conquering Europe with Bayern in 2020 – the Ballon d'Or was his, if *France Football* hadn't cancelled it.

49 DIDI

The elegant Brazilian nearly had his leg amputated as a teenager, but went on to win two World Cups, play for Real Madrid and invent the 'falling leaf' knuckleball free-kick. "I'm nothing compared to Didi – I'll never be anywhere near as good as he is." The words of Pele.
Career highlight Being named the 1958 World Cup's best player, ahead of Pele, Garrincha and the 13-goal Just Fontaine.

48 GIANLUIGI BUFFON



Footballers tend to wane at 30, but Buffon balanced quality and longevity like a 1970s Coppola movie, adding another eight scudetti to his Juventus tally. He's the only keeper to be in the Ballon d'Or top two since 1973 and, at 45, is still in Serie B and closing in on 1,200 career appearances.
Career highlight Starring in Italy's 2006 World Cup triumph.

47 GUNTER NETZER



One of the game's great passers, able to put the ball on a Deutsche Mark from any distance, Netzer won four trophies with Real Madrid but was at his stylish, dashing, playmaking best as the leader of a Monchengladbach team that won two German titles.
Career highlight Running the show as West Germany were crowned kings of Europe in 1972.

46 PAOLO ROSSI

Only nine players have won the Ballon d'Or, European Cup and World Cup; Rossi is one, despite having his best club spell with little Vicenza and failing to score in Italy's first four games at Spain 82. Six goals in their next three brought the Juventus star the Golden Boot, the Golden Ball and a world title.
Career highlight Netting a famous World Cup hat-trick against Brazil in 1982, then titling his autobiography *I Made Brazil Cry*.



45 KYLIAN MBAPPE

Already? Yes, already. The French star is a World Cup icon at 24

"Do I feel under pressure heading into the World Cup? No. For me, football is all about pleasure. A World Cup comes along once every four years. You can't afford to let it pass you by."

Those were Kylian Mbappe's words to *FourFourTwo* at the beginning of 2018. Five years later, he has ensured that his name will be linked with the tournament forever.

It should be far too early for Mbappe to earn consideration for a list such as this. But the 24-year-old could retire this month and still leave a legacy that will stand the test of time. Who knows where he will rank when his playing days come to an end?

A much-discussed prodigy since his early days in Monaco's first team, Mbappe didn't even make some of France's squads in the younger age groups. At the Under-17s Euros in 2015, for instance, Odsonne Edouard, Jonathan Ikone and the brilliantly-named Maxime Pelican got the nod ahead of him.

Two years later, the speedstar stunned Manchester City in the Champions League, helped Monaco to win Ligue 1, joined Paris Saint-Germain for £166 million and won the Golden Boy award as the world's best starlet.

Four more French titles have followed, though each one pales into insignificance next to his historic World Cup triumph in 2018, as the first teenager to score in the final since Pele, having outshone Lionel Messi in the last 16. A pleasure indeed.

Mbappe backed up his words to *FFT* again in Qatar, rising to the occasion on the biggest stage, which always divides the truly great players from the rest. When France looked down and out in the final, the forward saved them near-enough single-handedly, his equalising volley making the world sit up in awe. Here was a player capable of going toe-to-toe with Messi: the Duel In The Desert, between an all-time sports icon and another who's fast becoming one. Their head-to-head earned a page in football's history books.

Messi eventually won the World Cup, but Mbappe's hat-trick won him the Golden Boot as only the second man since 1970 to score eight goals at a single tournament, and the second in history to net a treble in the final.

No player has ever reached 12 World Cup goals at such a young age. Already, he has matched Pele's tally. Already, he is only four behind the record holder, Miroslav Klose.

The electric pace may fade over time but Mbappe could still have another three World Cups ahead of him. If the first two are any guide, he won't let any of them pass him by.



44 KENNY DALGLISH

Goals, pots and leadership made the Scot a hero at two clubs

It takes something special to become Liverpool's greatest ever player. Dalglish was on the path to immortality within a year of arriving at Anfield.

The game was 64 minutes old at Wembley in 1978 when Graeme Souness sent his fellow Scot clear on goal against Club Brugge in the European Cup final, at the end of Dalglish's first season in English football. The angle was tight, the goalkeeper advancing, the pressure intense, the opportunities to panic plentiful. Dalglish did nothing of the sort, showing the ingenuity and invention to exquisitely dink the ball over Birger Jensen into the far corner, to make Liverpool kings of Europe for a second year running.

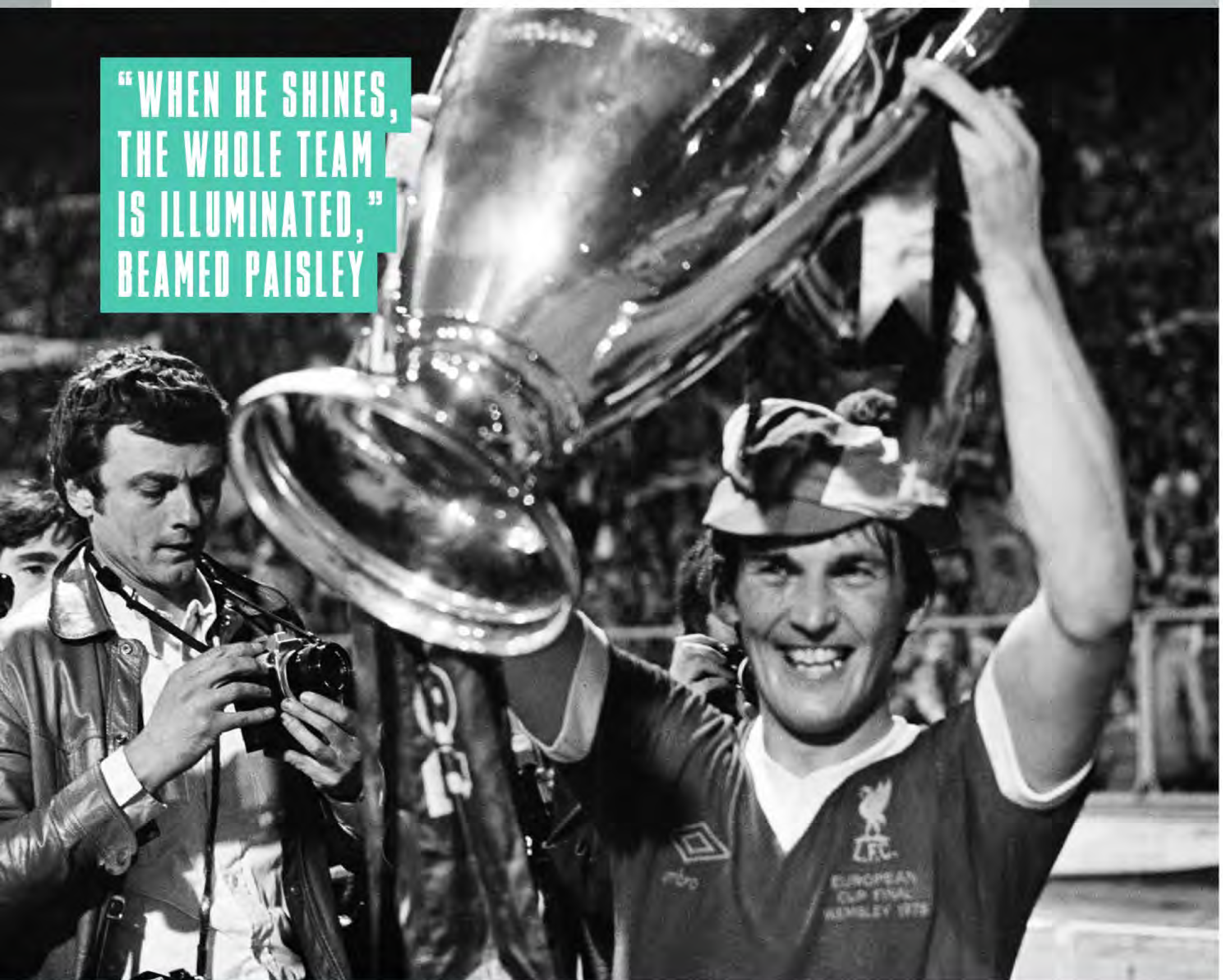
It was a goal that summed up a career. Dalglish wasn't the quickest – he was just smarter than everyone else. "The first yard is in his head," Bob Paisley once noted, as Dalglish terrorised defences in England and on the continent with his guile, then his feet.

Before he established himself as the Reds' finest ever footballer – a status that later European Cup-winning stars such as Steven Gerrard and Mohamed Salah have been unable to take from him – Dalglish was a club legend at Celtic, too, despite growing up as a Rangers supporter. He actually had trials with Liverpool and West Ham but preferred to stay in Scotland, and when Celtic came calling he wasn't going to say no – even if it wasn't Rangers. A total of 173 goals were plundered for the Bhoys, accompanying four league titles and two European Cup semis.

Liverpool paid a British record £440,000 to take him to Anfield in 1977 as a replacement for the Hamburg-bound Kevin Keegan. Some replacement – months later, Dalglish scored in a 6-0 shellacking of Keegan's Rothosen in the European Super Cup. The European Cup soon followed at Wembley in May. "It was fantastically enjoyable," King Kenny once told *FFT*. "Scoring that goal was the reason I left Glasgow: to achieve European success."

As well as scoring a joint-record 30 goals for Scotland across a record 102 appearances for the country, the forward became the first player to register 100 goals in both the Scottish and English leagues and formed a formidable partnership with the emerging Ian Rush at Liverpool, often as the provider. "I had no preference between scoring and creating," he explained. "It didn't matter as long as it ended in a goal."

Dalglish won eight league titles at Anfield and two more European Cups, also finishing second only to Michel Platini in the voting for the 1983 Ballon d'Or. "When Kenny shines, the whole team is illuminated," beamed Paisley, his manager. And no Liverpool player has shone brighter than Kenny Dalglish.



"WHEN HE SHINES, THE WHOLE TEAM IS ILLUMINATED," BEAMED PAISLEY

43 MICHAEL LAUDRUP



A seamlessly silky playmaker, and stalwart of Johan Cruyff's Dream Team that won four successive La Liga crowns for Barcelona, the Dane then inspired Luis Figo by joining Real Madrid – and took the championship trophy with him. Andres Iniesta called him "the best player in history".
Career highlight Wembley, '92: lifting Barça's first European Cup.

42 BOBBY MOORE

A footballing centre-half long before the concept was seen as fashionable, Moore remains the yardstick against whom all England defenders are measured. An international captain at just 23, he was serenely brilliant in 1966, Ballon d'Or runner-up in 1970 and a West Ham icon across a decade and a half.
Career highlight Receiving the World Cup from the Queen... having first wiped his hands on the velvet tablecloth, of course.

41 PACO GENTO



The rapid outside-left had a fierce shot, a superb moniker – 'The Gale of the Cantabrian Sea' – and, at Real Madrid, an innate understanding with Alfredo Di Stefano. Result: 12 Liga titles and a record six European Cups, never missing a game from 1955 to 1970.
Career highlight Captaining Los Blancos to victory in 1966, in his *eighth* European Cup final.

40 LUIS SUAREZ

No, not him. This Luis Suarez never bit anyone, though he did play for Barcelona, before joining Inter for a world-record fee in 1961 and winning back-to-back European Cups. A midfielder of rare vision, 'The Architect' remains the only Spanish-born player – and the only Luis Suarez – to have won the Ballon d'Or.
Career highlight In 1964, Suarez won the European Cup with Inter and the Euros with Spain: continental domination x2.

39 ROMARIO

Is it damning Romario with faint praise to call him 'the king of the toe poke'? Perhaps – but the Brazilian had such dazzling close control and nerveless finishing abilities that a goalkeeper was doomed from the moment Romario was put through on goal. In a word: prolific.
Career highlight Lifting the 1994 World Cup as player of the tournament, on the back of a 30-goal title-winning campaign in his only full season with Barcelona.

38 MATTHIAS SINDELAR

'The Mozart of Football' heroically led Austria's magnificent 1930s Wunderteam. In 1938, he celebrated a goal against Germany just after they'd annexed his country. He died mysteriously a year later. **Career highlight** The forward ghosted past defences as he captained Austria to the 1934 World Cup semis, where they lost controversially to hosts Italy.



37 VALENTINO MAZZOLA

The tragic Superga air crash in 1949 wiped out the legendary Grande Torino side; their star playmaker, Mazzola, was just 30. Five scudetti and a bonkers 125 team goals in 40 Serie A matches in 1947-48 will remain in the record books, yet stats alone can't convey the joy that Mazzola & Co brought Turin. **Career highlight** Using his prodigious heading ability, Mazzola netted 29 goals from midfield to win the Capocannoniere in 1946-47. Second place managed 21.

36 STANLEY MATTHEWS

'The Wizard of the Dribble' won the inaugural Ballon d'Or in 1956, at Blackpool, and a decade later at Stoke he set a lasting record as the English top flight's oldest player, at 50. **Career highlight** The 1953 FA Cup Final is forever known as The Matthews Final, despite poor Stan Mortensen's hat-trick.



35 RIVALDO

From a malnourished upbringing in one of Brazil's favelas, Rivaldo turned his desire and wand of a left foot into a career that brought the Ballon d'Or, Champions League, back-to-back La Liga titles and the 2002 World Cup. Decent. **Career highlight** Rivaldo could do it all, and when Barcelona faced Valencia on June 17, 2001, he had to. His bicycle kick sealed a hat-trick, earned a 3-2 win and took Barça into the Champions League.

34 RAYMOND KOPA

Born Raymond Kopaszewski, the son of Polish immigrants became a French hero at Reims but lost the first European Cup final to Real Madrid. He promptly went there and won it three times, seeing off Reims in one final. Ouch. **Career highlight** The 1958 Ballon d'Or winner also lends his name to today's under-21 equivalent: the Kopa Trophy.



33 LOTHAR MATTHAUS

The 150-cap World Cup winner on dreams, despair and Diego

At 19, you were in West Germany's squad as they won Euro 1980. How did that feel?
It was my dream to represent my country. I hadn't been expected to make the squad, but injuries meant the coach, Jupp Derwall, had some room for me. I only played in one match, but it was an incredible experience and vital in helping me to become a big part of the squad in future tournaments.

After moving to Bayern Munich in 1984, you instantly bagged three Bundesliga titles in a row – not bad going...
It wasn't easy to say goodbye to Borussia Monchengladbach – they had given me my chance at the top level and I loved the club – but Bayern came calling and I wanted to win titles. I was immediately struck by the fierce mentality in the dressing room. That was the





key to our success. We had talented players, but our will to win – to fight for one another and never give less than everything – was the real reason behind our victories.

Then you moved to Inter in 1988, winning trophies alongside compatriots Andreas Brehme and Jurgen Klinsmann...
It was an amazing time. Italian football was probably at its peak, with some magnificent players: Diego Maradona, Ruud Gullit, Roberto Baggio, Marco van Basten... and that was just our rivals! Every weekend was a battle, and at Inter we were willing to die on the field for one another. To share that experience with my compatriots – two excellent players with huge mentalities – was a privilege. Off the pitch, our team-mates adopted us as three of their own – Italians who just happened to be from another nation. We all spent a lot of time together, at restaurants and at each other's homes. We had that unity to thank for our on-pitch success. I value my Serie A and UEFA Cup medals extremely highly.

As you were captaining West Germany to glory at Italia 90 during that period, what do you remember of the semi-final against England, with Gazza's tears and a penalty shootout win for your team?
It was one of the best matches of the whole tournament. England were an outstanding team and also deserved to reach the final for their performance that night. Paul Gascoigne was a player we knew we'd have to keep an eye on. He had vision and strength, but he could dribble like a forward despite playing deeper, in midfield. Unfortunately for them, England maybe lost the emotional battle of that game – not just with Gazza, but when it came to the penalties, too. Thankfully, we remained a bit more calm and focused. That was the only difference in the end.

Is it true you donned Diego Maradona's boots when you faced his Argentina side in the World Cup final?
Not exactly. Maradona and I became good friends during our time playing against each other in Italy. I loved him as a person and hugely admired him as a player. Just before that World Cup, Napoli came to play us in Milan and Diego asked to borrow a pair of boots, as he didn't have some with him for whatever reason. I gave him a pair. Later, at the World Cup, he returned them and I wore them in the final. So, they were mine really.

Given that Maradona – whom you had also faced in the 1986 World Cup Final – called you his greatest ever competitor, why was it that you, more than other players, were able to get the better of him?
Well, to be clear, I don't think anybody ever got the better of Diego – I was only human after all! All I can say is that I relished pitting myself against the very best. I wanted to face the greatest players and prove to myself that I belonged at that level. He was magnificent – a player of such sublime courage and skill. I wasn't in the same league as Maradona from a technical standpoint, but I knew my

"MARADONA DIDN'T HAVE HIS BOOTS SO I LENT HIM SOME. HE GAVE THEM BACK FOR THE WORLD CUP FINAL"

strengths and prepared myself mentally for every single battle. It was a pleasure to share a football pitch with him.

Do you believe that you were truly the best player in the world at a point in your career when you won the 1990 Ballon d'Or and 1991 FIFA World Player of the Year?
It was a huge honour to win those awards, especially given some of the incredible talent around. I wouldn't say I was the best in the world, but I was playing well for successful teams, at club level and on the international stage. Winning the World Cup in 1990 gave me the platform to win those prizes, so my team-mates were crucial.

When you moved back to Bayern in 1992, you enjoyed success as a sweeper – why?
Well, I wasn't a sweeper, or libero, in the traditional sense – I actually operated at the base of midfield in a deeper No.6 position. But I did drop back to collect the ball and help build attacks, that's true. As a younger player, I would run forward to join moves and try to score but, with age, you find yourself needing to rely on experience as opposed to dynamism. I managed to play a lot longer by learning to adapt my game and stay deeper.

You're one of the greatest players never to have won the European Cup: two late Porto goals denied you in the final in 1987, then two late Manchester United goals did the same in 1999. Which was more painful?
Oh, 1999 – no contest. That defeat hurt so much more because, whereas Porto were a thorn in our side for that entire evening, we were a lot better than Manchester United at the Camp Nou. We dominated from start to finish and should have put the match to bed even before half-time. They had some good chances, certainly, but ours were far more dangerous. They never gave up, though, and anything can happen in football, especially when you don't kill off your opponent. It still pains me now to remember that defeat. We had one hand on the trophy.

You played for Germany until you were 39, taking in 150 caps, five World Cups and four European Championships. How does it feel to be a legend of German football?
There's no feeling like playing for your country and I'm very proud of my achievements with the national team, from my first appearance at Euro 80 right up to Euro 2000. Getting to lift the World Cup as West Germany captain was the greatest moment of my whole life. I was fortunate to enjoy a wonderful career and play in several historic matches – it was a lot of fun.

32 SOCRATES



A deep thinker, as the name suggests, and football's ultimate bohemian icon, Socrates happened to also be a formidable midfielder in one of *the* great international teams. To top it off, he made the no-look backheel pass his signature move. Very, very cool.
Career highlight Dazzling the planet with his skilful displays for Brazil at the 1982 World Cup.

31 MANUEL NEUER

The original 21st-century ball-playing goalkeeper convinced Pep Guardiola to abandon building with midfielders and leave it to the gloveman and his backline. His shot-stopping isn't bad either, helping Bayern Munich to win 10 Bundesliga titles and two Champions Leagues. His skiing isn't quite so good...
Career highlight An extraordinary sweeper-keeper show against Algeria in Germany's 2014 World Cup triumph.

30 RUUD GULLIT



This footballer of impossible elegance transcended positions, playing in every role from sweeper to forward. Gullit was sensational for Feyenoord and PSV, winning the Ballon d'Or even before he became a European champion with Milan and the Oranje.
Career highlight Opening the scoring in the Euro 88 Final, then again in the '89 European Cup Final.

29 THIERRY HENRY

Untouchable for the half-decade that he spent at his peak, Henry chaperoned Arsenal through the most glittering period of their modern history, scoring goals of great quality and in great quantity. *FFT*'s 2021 choice as the Premier League's finest also conquered Europe and the world with France. Va va voom.
Career highlight Arsenal wouldn't have become the Invincibles in 2003-04 if not for Henry's 30-goal league campaign.

28 LUKA MODRIC



Once an actual goat herder, now many's GOAT, Modric's supreme passing skills were pivotal to herding his Real Madrid team-mates to Champions League glory again and again. He has bagged the trophy five times, a joint record for the post-European Cup era.
Career highlight Taking Croatia to a World Cup final and ending a Messi-Ronaldo Ballon d'Or duopoly.

27 ROBERTO BAGGIO

A No.10 who scored and created with equal glee and lit up not one, but two World Cups. 'The Divine Ponytail' bagged a solo goal for the ages in 1990 against Czechoslovakia, then masterminded Italy's run to the USA 94 final. Admittedly, that didn't conclude too well.



Career highlight Winning the 1993 Ballon d'Or at Juventus.

26 CARLOS ALBERTO

Taking the attacking full-back baton from compatriot Nilton Santos in the 1950s and running with it, *O Capitao* paved the way for Cafu, Roberto Carlos and many more. His leadership was pivotal at the 1970 World Cup, and he also shone alongside Pele at Santos.
Career highlight His stunning first-time finish in the World Cup final against Italy, rounding off a stellar team move, is rated by many as the greatest ever scored.

25 FRANCO BARESI

Milan's back-to-back European Cups of 1989 and 1990 were founded on their defence. The 5ft 9in *Piscinin* – Milan dialect for 'little guy' – was its 719-game leader, a laconic libero who combined vision with strength to create purest centre-back alchemy.



Career highlight Played on with a broken arm in the 1989 Milan derby, in a 3-0 victory. Nails.

24 ANDRES INIESTA

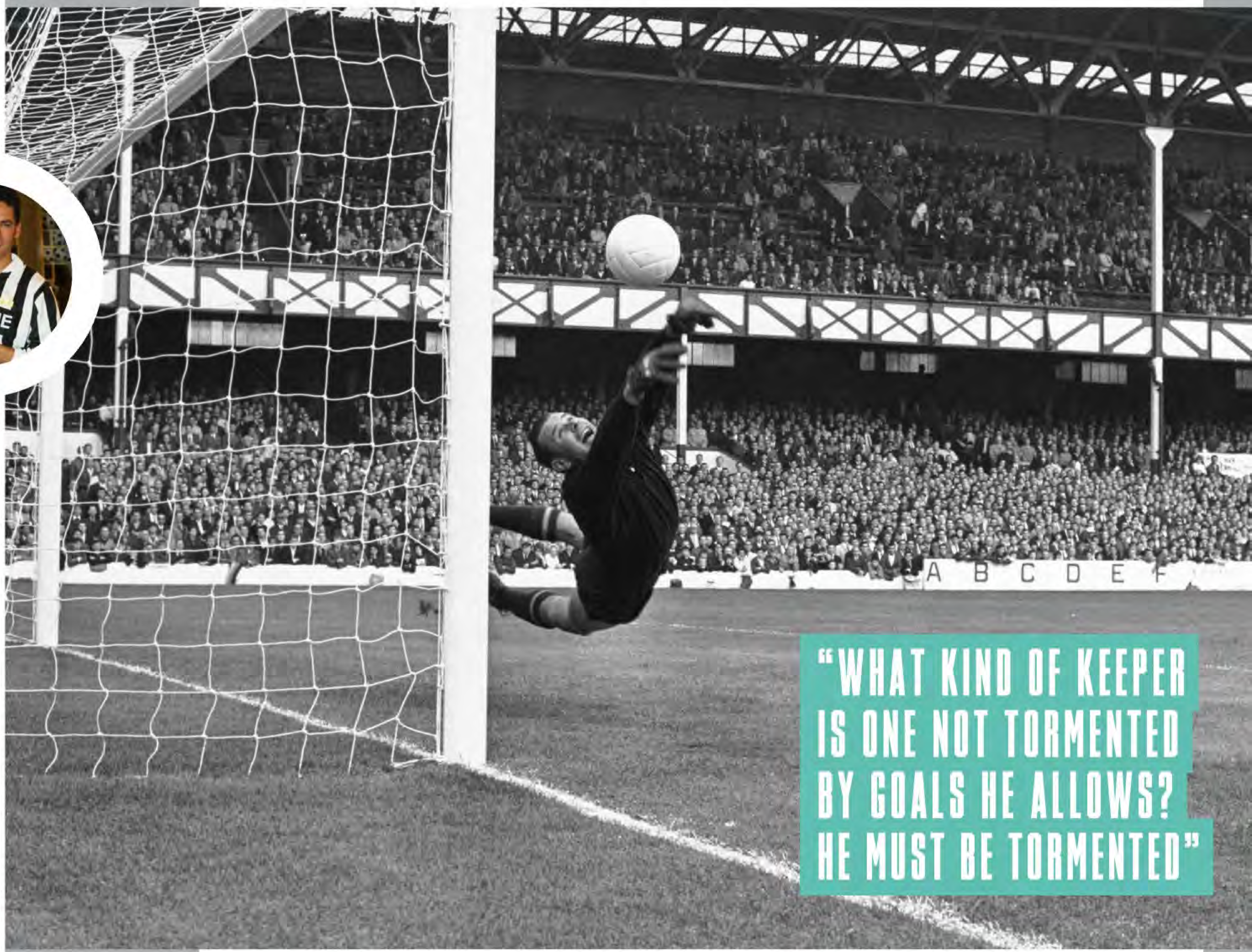
Football's modern age has given us more exciting players, but few as supremely watchable as *El Cerebro* (The Brain). He never surrendered possession cheaply, even on meandering final third runs.



Career highlight Scoring Spain's winner in extra time in the 2010 World Cup Final, matched only by his cigar-puffing backheel in the build-up.

23 XAVI

Seemingly joined at the hip with Iniesta, the Barcelona midfielder was the heartbeat of arguably the finest club team of all time, and a Spain side that lifted three successive trophies. "The best players in the world (and Xavi)," ran the *Daily Mail* headline when he finished fifth in the 2008 Ballon d'Or voting after Euros glory. Unlike them to be wrong...
Career highlight A fourth Champions League title in 2015, his last Barça game.



"WHAT KIND OF KEEPER IS ONE NOT TORMENTED BY GOALS HE ALLOWS? HE MUST BE TORMENTED"

22 LEV YASHIN

The Black Spider gave goalkeepers everywhere a role model

Only one goalkeeper has ever won the Ballon d'Or, and a match in England may have played a significant part.

In 1963 there was no major international tournament, and Soviet outfits had yet to enter the European Cup. There was, however, a match between England and a Rest of the World side at Wembley, to mark football's 100th anniversary. Alfredo Di Stefano, Ferenc Puskas and Eusebio were among those who appeared for the visitors, but it was Yashin who stole the show in just 45 minutes. He pulled off a string of sensational saves from Jimmy Greaves, keeping the scoreline at 0-0 before going off at half-time.

A couple of months later, the Ballon d'Or was his aged 34 after winning his fifth Soviet league title with Dynamo Moscow, conceding only seven goals in 27 games.

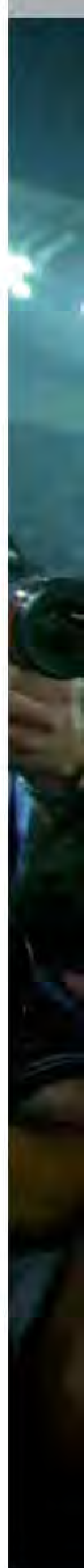
Yashin was ahead of his time, frequently rushing off his line to intercept marauding forwards, head the ball away from danger and bark at defenders. His big break came not long after the end of World War Two. Evacuated east from Moscow to Ulyanovsk at 11, he worked in a munitions factory but had a nervous breakdown at 18, deciding to volunteer for military service before his goalkeeping talent was spotted by Dynamo.

A decent ice hockey net minder for Dynamo until focusing on football, Yashin guided the Soviets to gold at the 1956 Olympics, then impressed at the 1958 World Cup to earn his nickname 'The Black Spider', courtesy of what seemed an all-black strip but was actually very dark blue in a pre-colour TV era. He later won the inaugural Euros in 1960.

Yashin saved more than 150 penalties in his career, keeping 270 clean sheets, though his Ballon d'Or triumph actually came after a torrid 1962 World Cup when concussion prompted some uncharacteristic mistakes. He responded with one of the best years of his career, then by being the star goalkeeper at Euro 64 as the Soviets reached the final again. At the 1966 World Cup, Yashin helped them to fourth place, their greatest finish.

When a Ballon d'Or all-time dream team was selected in 2020, it was Yashin who was chosen between the sticks, ahead of Manuel Neuer, Gigi Buffon and other legends.

With the year's standout goalkeeper now awarded the Yashin Trophy, he remains the gold standard for all aspiring shot-stoppers. "What kind of goalkeeper is the one who is not tormented by the goal he has allowed? He must be tormented!" he once said. "And if he is calm, that means the end."





21 RONALDINHO

Few have been so fun to watch as the ultimate showboat king

Real Madrid had just fallen 3-0 behind to their bitter rivals in November 2005, but there was a strange sound reverberating around the Bernabeu. Was it... applause?

Indeed it was – for a Barcelona player. Seconds before, Ronaldinho had darted in from the left wing for his second incredible solo goal of the game. The Madrid fans had witnessed greatness and felt compelled to acknowledge it. Two years earlier, Los Blancos had refused to pursue a move for their future tormentor because, according to an official, he was "so ugly he'd sink you as a brand".

That night, more than any other, illustrated just how special the Brazilian was. "I value it a lot more now than I did then," he later told *FFT*. "When it happened, I barely noticed – I scored and celebrated. But few players get such an honour there."

For a period, Ronaldinho was not just the best footballer on the planet but arguably the most skilful player the world had ever seen. Even now, he remains the ultimate showboat king. He represents pure football joy.

Four minutes into his competitive debut for Brazil in 1999 he'd flicked the ball over one defender's head and scored brilliantly against Venezuela at the Copa America. Three years on, he formed an iconic World Cup-winning front three alongside Ronaldo and Rivaldo, sending England packing from Japan with his famous 'dry leaf' free-kick from fully 40 yards. "I saw that David Seaman was off his line and aimed at the goal, although not exactly where the ball went," he insisted.

Rejected by Madrid, he looked set to join Manchester United in 2003 only for Real to gazump Barcelona to David Beckham's signing and prompt the Camp Nou club to recruit the buck-toothed Brazilian instead. It proved a pretty good move – Ronaldinho was a Barcelona hero from the moment he hammered home a thunderbolt on his debut against Sevilla in a match that kicked off at 12.05am because of a dispute between both clubs. "It was no problem, because that's my favourite time of day!" the semi-noctornual party animal smiled. 'Ronaldinho out scoring until the small hours,' read the inevitable newspaper headlines.

Years of brilliance and flip-flops followed, plus a stunning toe poke goal at Stamford Bridge. He won the 2005 Ballon d'Or then guided Barça to Champions League final victory against Arsenal months later. Few players have been quite so fun to watch, and none have played with such ethereal beauty. Not bad for someone too 'ugly' for football.

"HE WAS NOT JUST THE BEST PLAYER ON THE PLANET AT ONE POINT BUT THE MOST SKILFUL"



20 GIUSEPPE MEAZZA

When one of the world's greatest football grounds is renamed in your honour, you probably did something right. San Siro became Stadio Giuseppe Meazza shortly after the forward's death in 1979. An Inter and Italy legend for his mazy dribbling and clinical finishing, and still fourth on Serie A's all-time goals list. **Career highlight** Winning back-to-back World Cups in 1934 and 1938. Only Gigi Riva has managed more Azzurri goals.

19 PAOLO MALDINI



Few players play 1,000 competitive games, fewer still as a mainstay at a European heavyweight. Maldini won seven Serie As and conquered the continent five times – the first in 1989, the last in 2007 – all with a Milanese *grinta* (grit), dreamy blue eyes and perfect cheekbones. A defensive great. **Career highlight** Winning the league unbeaten in 1991-92. Class.

18 BOBBY CHARLTON



Charlton's aura was palpable. The 'Busby Babe' survived the 1958 Munich air crash and dedicated his life to proving he deserved it. He fired England to World Cup success in 1966 and despite not being a forward, he set goalscoring records for club and country. **Career highlight** His brace in the 1968 European Cup Final for Manchester United. He'd earned it.

17 GARRINCHA

'The Little Bird' defied a crooked spine and a penchant for goats to flummox left-backs with his sinuous dribbling and trickery. Instrumental as Brazil won the 1958 and 1962 World Cups, the so-called 'Angel with Bent Legs' is also remembered as the *Alegria do Povo*, 'Joy of the People'. A real one-off. **Career highlight** With Pele out injured, Garrincha took charge of the Selecao in 1962, ending as the tournament's star.

16 EUSEBIO



The first great footballer of African birth, the 1965 Ballon d'Or winner left Mozambique for Benfica – he was 'discovered' in a Lisbon barbershop – and amassed 11 league titles, a European Cup and averaged more than a goal a game over seven mesmerising campaigns. **Career highlight** Only one Portuguese has won the World Cup Golden Boot. Sorry, Cristiano.

15 ZICO

The greatest Brazilian never to win a World Cup, Zico scored 333 goals at the Maracana alone and lifted three national titles, a Copa Libertadores and an Intercontinental Cup with Flamengo. Arguably the finest free-kick taker ever and a sublime dribbler, 'The Little Rooster' was "the one player that came closest to me in playing style", according to Pele.
Career highlight Four goals at Spain 82, each one a study in technical brilliance.

14 MARCO VAN BASTEN

The most complete, balletic striker of the last half-century, and one of the great what-ifs. 'The Swan of Utrecht' won two European Cups and three Ballons d'Or, but glass ankles meant he played his last game at 28. A tragedy.
Career highlight What else? *That* volley, to confirm the Netherlands' only major trophy, in the final of Euro 88.



13 MICHEL PLATINI

Platini's chess grandmaster vision rendered his notorious indolence irrelevant. He won three Ballons d'Or in a row from 1983, Euro 84 with France and the 1985 European Cup as Juventus' "foie gras", said president Gianni Agnelli.
Career highlight The extra-time winner in Euro 84's semi with Portugal, one of a mind-melting nine goals in five games.



12 FERENC PUSKAS

'The Galloping Major' hit 84 goals in 89 caps, an international record for half a century. Forced out of Hungary in 1956, Puskas won three European Cups with Real Madrid – not bad for a fat lad.
Career highlight A drag-back to make England's Billy Wright "a fire engine rushing to the wrong fire" for his second goal in the Magyars' 6-3 romp in 1953.



11 GERD MULLER

All 'Der Bomber' did was score, but he was supreme at it. Muller netted a Bundesliga record 365 goals across 427 appearances for Bayern Munich, won three consecutive European Cups and is part of a select group to average more than a goal a game in internationals. The greatest pure striker in football history.
Career highlight Right place, right time – same as it ever was – for West Germany's winner in the 1974 World Cup Final.

10 GEORGE BEST

Football's rock star, 'The Fifth Beatle' defined his era and more

Best's extraordinary natural talent not only made him one of the most iconic and entertaining players there has been, but the finest from the British Isles.

"If I'd been ugly," he once said, "You'd never have heard of Pele." A stretch, maybe, but it was an acknowledgement that for all Best's ability, the addictions he could never quite quit stopped him from achieving even more.

In 1968 – his pace, belief, technical ability, balance and creativity in perfect symmetry – a 22-year-old Best followed the other two of Manchester United's 'Holy Trinity' (Bobby Charlton and Denis Law) in being awarded the Ballon d'Or. What should have been the start proved a peak he'd never scale again.

Best had made his United debut just five years earlier. A boyhood Wolves supporter, the Belfast boy was rejected by local club Glentoran for being too small. Soon, he was the hottest ticket in British football.

"My best performance was for Northern Ireland against Scotland," he revealed to *FFT*. "We were expected to get slaughtered, but we won 1-0. Everything I tried came off. I'd have had about four goals, but for the keeper. For United, it was our win against Benfica in 1966 – I scored twice in 12 minutes."

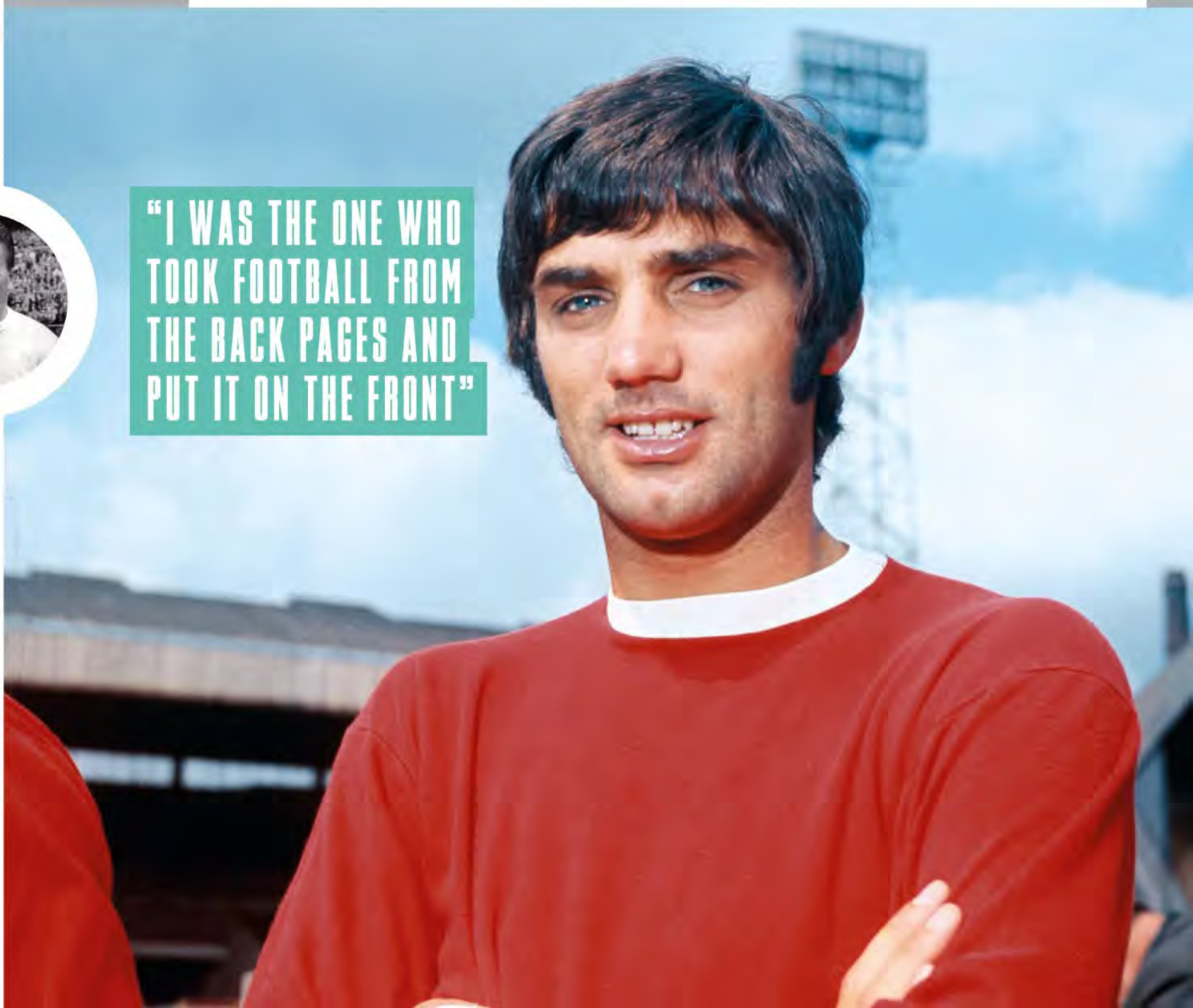
That European Cup performance in Lisbon prompted the Portuguese media to label him 'The Fifth Beatle' – two years later, he bagged the winner in the semi-final first leg at home to Real Madrid, then laid on the assist for Bill Foulkes to clinch the tie at the Bernabeu.

In the showpiece, against Benfica once more, it was Best who brilliantly rounded the goalkeeper to put United firmly on course for victory. Not only did he win the Ballon d'Or, he also became the youngest ever recipient of the Football Writers' Association's Footballer of the Year award, after a season in which he'd notched 32 goals in 53 games.

United's top scorer in the league for five successive campaigns, he netted a record double hat-trick at Northampton in the FA Cup in 1970, but the team declined around him as off-field distractions began to take their toll on Best himself. Opening his own nightclub, Slack Alice, in 1973 hardly helped.

His last appearance for the club came at the age of 27, before the attacker turned out for a random assortment of teams – among them Dunstable, South African side Jewish Guild, Stockport, Cork Celtic, Los Angeles Aztecs, Fulham, Hibernian, Hong Kong club Sea Bee, Bournemouth and Brisbane Lions.

"I was the one who took football off the back pages and put it on to page one," was how he reflected on his eventful career. Best had enough star quality to dominate both.



"I WAS THE ONE WHO TOOK FOOTBALL FROM THE BACK PAGES AND PUT IT ON THE FRONT"

09 RONALDO

O Fenomeno's solo stunner at Compostela for Barcelona – one of 47 goals in 1996-97 – inspired ex-Real Madrid star Jorge Valdano to declare, "he's not a man, he's a herd". Not even a twice-rebuilt knee could stop the two-time Ballon d'Or winner, who evolved into a poacher. **Career highlight** A lethal final brace at the 2002 World Cup.



08 ALFREDO DI STEFANO

"The most intelligent footballer ever," Bobby Charlton once wrote of 'The Blond Arrow'. The leonine forward won the first five European Cups with Real Madrid – strike partner Ferenc Puskas called him "the best there is ever likely to be" – and was the game's first superstar. **Career highlight** A hat-trick in Madrid's 7-3 annihilation of Frankfurt at Hampden Park in the 1960 European Cup Final. Ball boy Alex Ferguson watched on in awe.

07 FRANZ BECKENBAUER

Originally a centre-forward, 'Der Kaiser' made his Bayern Munich debut as a left-winger before all-but creating the sweeper role. From 1972 to 1976, Beckenbauer led club and country to three successive European Cups, Euro 72 and a World Cup. **Career highlight** Lifting Bayern's third European crown, against Saint-Etienne in 1976.



06 ZINEDINE ZIDANE

'Zizou' disproved football's great misconception that style comes at the expense of steel. The Juventus, Real Madrid and France No.10's alluring pirouettes, goals – the 2002 Champions League Final volley is an all-time classic – and headbutts combined to create a supernatural genius. **Career highlight** Two headers in the 1998 World Cup Final.



05 JOHAN CRUYFF

The Total Football poster boy's supreme individualism won a hat-trick of European Cups at Ajax, revolutionised Barcelona and took the Dutch to a first World Cup final. "Winning is just one day, a reputation can last a lifetime," he once said. **Career highlight** Twisting Swede Jan Olsson's blood to create his eponymous turn.





IT'S HARD NOT TO SEE RONALDO THROUGH THE PRISM OF QATAR, BUT HE REMAINS A GREAT

04 CRISTIANO RONALDO

CR7's legacy planning took a battering in 2022. What next?

When Ronaldo became the first player to score at five World Cups, two days after Argentina opened their 2022 campaign with a shock defeat to Saudi Arabia, he hoped it would be the start of his bid to usurp Lionel Messi forever. Instead, things unravelled irreparably in just a few weeks.

While Messi went on to win the World Cup, Ronaldo found himself dropped by Portugal, eliminated by Morocco, then unwanted by Europe's top clubs after not so much burning his bridges at Manchester United, as blowing them to smithereens with a barrage of Piers Morgan-loaded HIMARS missiles.

"It's not the end of my career to come to South Africa," insisted CR7 upon his arrival at, er, Saudi Arabian side Al Nassr, with a classic Robinho-esque gaffe that probably gave away he wasn't thrilled to be at his new club with average gates of just 8,000 last season. "In Europe, my work is done," he continued, flexing as a self-defence mechanism. It was hard to escape the suspicion that Europe had decided it was done with him.

All careers must come to a close, and few are afforded the luxury of a happy ending. Zinedine Zidane literally bowed out with a red card; Diego Maradona had drugs bans in his final years. At 37, football's King Canute has done an extraordinary job of holding back the ageing process, scoring 66 goals for Portugal since his 30th birthday to set a new international goalscoring record, and taking his Champions League tally to a record 140.

Ronaldo's mobility no longer matches his monumental motivation, but his inability to accept that things could still be what they once were is a frustration too far. Letting go of the dream of recapturing old glories was never going to be easy, but defenestrating his own legacy is quite the career choice. His £173m-a-season contract is CR7's way of controlling his world-beating narrative.

This is a player who's won both the Ballon d'Or and the Champions League five times, captained Portugal to their only international trophy, won four European Golden Shoes and become Real Madrid's record scorer, netting at least 50 club goals in six straight seasons – not even Messi did that at Barcelona.

Right now, it's hard not to view Ronaldo through the prism of Qatar 2022 – that long tearful walk back to the dressing room, while his greatest rival went on to lift the trophy and secure supremacy forevermore.

But for more than half his life, Ronaldo has been a superstar, one of the finest players of all time. No one has spent so long at the top.



02 PELE

O Rei dominated the World Cup – and his legacy stays strong

Words Chris Flanagan **Additional reporting** Caio Carrieri

With two goals in a resounding Brazil win, a teenage striker announced himself on the global stage at the 1958 World Cup.

Already a star of his country's Campeonato Paulista, for clubs in and around Sao Paulo, he had travelled to Sweden as one of South America's brightest talents, eager to deliver the Selecao their first ever World Cup trophy.

In the tiny town of Uddevalla, north of Gothenburg, things couldn't have begun any better for 19-year-old Palmeiras forward Mazzola. It was he, not Santos' 17-year-old striker, Pele, who started Brazil's opening game of that tournament and scored twice in a 3-0 win over Austria.

As it turned out, Mazzola would never net for Brazil again. Three days later, he was injured in a 0-0 draw against England, just as Pele was returning to fitness following a knee problem. While the Palmeiras man faded into the background in Sweden, before joining Milan that summer and appearing for the Italian national team under his original name of Jose Altafini, Brazil's even younger starlet made the World Cup his own.

By the tournament's end, Pele had bagged a brace in a 5-2 final win against the hosts, scored six times in all, and wowed the world in a way no footballer had before. And for the next decade, he was the best player on Earth.

FULFILLING A PROMISE

At first, Pele just wanted to emulate his dad. Dondinho was a striker with Bauru, a small city north-west of Sao Paulo. "My father scored a lot of goals," Pele told *FourFourTwo* in an exclusive interview back in 2010. "I said, 'One day, I'm going to be like him'."

Aged nine, he saw his father cry as Brazil missed out on lifting their first ever World Cup trophy, beaten on home soil by Uruguay in the infamous Maracanazo of 1950. "I said, 'Don't worry, Daddy – I'm going to win the World Cup for you'," recalled Pele.

Dondinho instilled in him an ethos that practice made perfect. "He always advised me to work on things," said the forward. "He said, 'If you're well prepared and train how ▸

03 DIEGO MARADONA

How do you separate the three greatest footballers of all time? A worthy case could be argued for each – yet we can pick only one. Longevity, trophies and sheer #numbers give our No.1 and No.2 the slightest of edges, but boy, was Diego Maradona exciting.


El Pibe de Oro outgrew his 'Golden Boy' status, if not the nickname; more than just a man, Maradona became a deity in Argentina and Naples, his adopted home. His otherworldly dribbling skills enthralled a generation from the moment he made his Argentinos Juniors debut at 15 and nutmegged a player with his first touch. After scoring 116 goals in 166 games, he joined Boca and won the league title.

A year later, Barcelona paid £5m, and within months he'd taken Real Madrid apart at the Bernabeu, earning him a rare ovation from Madridistas. When injury, illness, illicit substances and an infamous brawl in the Copa del Rey final ended his brief time in Spain, Napoli made him the first player to set a world-record transfer fee twice. Diego more than repaid them: he inspired – some would say dragged – the Partenopei to the only three Italian and European titles in their history.

Either side of Napoli's two scudetti, the 5ft 5in maestro won Argentina the 1986 World Cup (five goals, five assists), then captained a weaker team to 1990's final. Two unremarkable sides, immortalised by *El Pibe*. His unique mark of true greatness.

Career highlight Never mind the Hand: to watch Maradona ride tackles and run rings around England – part ballerina, part bulldozer – to score the greatest individual goal, in the greatest individual World Cup, was to see the face of God.





IN THE SPACE OF 12 MONTHS, PELE HAD WON EVERYTHING IT WAS POSSIBLE TO WIN. HE WAS STILL 21 YEARS OLD

to kick with your left foot, nobody's going to stop you'. So, I trained more, instead of going to the beach or the movies. Always, I was better prepared than anybody else."

Soon, his progress in Bauru's youth ranks started to seriously catch people's attention. "When I got to 12, 13 or 14, people started to say 'Oh, the son of Dondinho is a good player'," explained Pele. "Then a friend of my father, Waldemar de Brito, got me a trial at Santos. In the first week, they said, 'OK, we're going to sign you'. That's when I started to realise that I must be quite good."

Displaying some Nostradamic clairvoyance skills, Waldemar had told Santos that they were signing a kid who would become the best player in the world. Pele was joining a club that won the regional Campeonato Paulista for the first time in 20 years in 1955, then repeated the feat a season later.

Aged 15, the striker scored on his debut in a friendly that year. By the beginning of 1957, he was regularly starting games. Not only did he impress; he took Santos' attack to a whole new level. They hit 144 goals in 37 Paulista fixtures – 45 more than any other team, and 46 more than they had registered in the previous season – and Pele was the league's top scorer, netting 36 times in 29 matches.

These were astonishing numbers for any player, let alone a 16-year-old, and after some standout performances for a combined Santos-Vasco team in a strange exhibition tournament, Pele earned a Brazil debut.

It came in the most daunting of venues: the Maracana, scene of the cause for his father's tears in 1950, and against perennial foes Argentina, who had crushed Brazil three months earlier in the South American Championship's de facto final. To add further pressure, some 80,000 spectators watched the visitors score first through Angel Labruna, 22 years Pele's senior. Yet the debutant needed just 31 minutes to become the Selecao's youngest ever goalscorer – a record yet to be broken. "People went crazy, because it wasn't normal," he later told *FFT*.

He'd scored five goals in five caps when the 1958 World Cup came around – the first time he had ever travelled outside of Brazil. Any excitement was tempered when injury sidelined him for their opening two games.

After the Selecao failed to find a way past England, changes were made for the key match against the Soviet Union. In came the







Clockwise from above "Pele, let someone else ogle the trophy now"; if you've got it, flaunt it; Pele's Santos were the world's best club side; man of destiny; he had to learn quickly in 1958 how he should sign autographs





fit-again Pele, and he linked up brilliantly with Vava for Brazil's second goal as they won to confirm progression to the quarter-finals.

Four days later, he set a record that still stands today: as the World Cup's youngest ever scorer, at 17 years and 239 days, flicking the ball past Wales' Mel Charles before bagging the only goal of the game.

In the last four, Brazil faced France and Just Fontaine, who had improbably netted eight goals in four games and quickly added a ninth. However, French captain Robert Jonquet broke his leg and his team were up against it, with no substitutions allowed. Pele struck a second-half hat-trick, including an emphatic volley into the bottom corner.

Brazil won 5-2, then defeated Sweden by the same scoreline. After 35-year-old Nils Liedholm secured his place in history as the oldest scorer in a World Cup final, Pele became the youngest, controlling a cross on his chest, flicking the ball over a defender's head and volleying into the net for one of the tournament's great goals. Then, in the final minute, with his team 4-2 up and confidence flowing, the 17-year-old backheeled the ball out to the left wing, charged into the area and headed home his second of the match.

At the final whistle, Pele wept, just as his father had done eight years previously. This time, though, it was with joy. He'd fulfilled his promise and won a first ever World Cup for Brazil. To this day, no other side from outside Europe has lifted the trophy on European soil.

WINNING THE QUINTUPLE

Like Mazzola, Pele could have left Brazil for Milan that summer: reports claimed Inter agreed a fee but didn't complete the transfer due to fan protests and suggestions that the player wasn't keen. Pele remained at Santos and scored 58 – yes, 58 – goals in 38 games as they won the Campeonato Paulista, a tally that unsurprisingly is still a championship record. A mere 17 in his other 15 competitive fixtures was poor by comparison.

In 1959, the prodigy scored what he always regarded as the best goal of his career: a solo effort against Clube Atletico Juventus, sadly not captured by the TV cameras. "He scored a hat-trick," says Lima, a teenage opponent that afternoon but later Pele's team-mate with Santos and Brazil. "For the third goal, he controlled the ball without letting it touch the ground, flicked it over four defenders, then our keeper. On days like that, he was absolutely unplayable." Including friendlies, he was reported to have scored 128 goals during the calendar year.

Another Campeonato Paulista triumph in 1960 set up Santos to become national champions for the first time in 1961. In some style, too – after Santos drew the first leg of the final 1-1 in Bahia, Pele settled any nerves in the second by hitting a hat-trick in the opening half-hour. There was beauty behind the numbers, too. A length-of-the-field run and solo effort against Fluminense earlier that campaign led to the Maracana having a plaque unveiled, to mark what it declared was the stadium's most beautiful goal.

HAD HE BEEN ELIGIBLE, SAID *FRANCE FOOTBALL*, PELE WOULD'VE WON THE BALLON D'OR SEVEN TIMES

Pele later revealed that another Italian giant bid for him in 1961. Juventus offered $1m (around £360,000 then), at a time when the world record transfer fee was less than half that. But the forward remained happy where he was, with his friends at Santos.

"He was so humble," says Lima, who joined the club that year. "When one reaches the level of the world's best player, it'd be easy to become arrogant and ignore people around him, but he did completely the opposite.

"His presence was something magical. Pele invited me to live at Georgina's Boarding House, where he and other Santos players lived. It was amazing there because of the atmosphere of conviviality – I slept on a bunk bed in Pele's bedroom. When they said I was going to stay in his bedroom, my reaction was, 'Bloody hell, now I'm in God's hands!'

"Pele was the only one who owned a car, so he used to take us everywhere. He was pretty laid-back in terms of arriving on time for training sessions, though! Our striker, Coutinho, loved to say, 'He only does this because he's Pele – if it was one of us, our bank account would be bleeding with fines!'"

A regional and national champion at the start of 1962, by the summer Pele was world champion for a second time with Brazil – still the last side to defend their title. He featured in only two matches at the World Cup in Chile, however, darting past four defenders and firing past a fifth to score against Mexico before injury against Czechoslovakia ruled him out of the rest of the tournament.

By September, he was back helping Santos to a first ever Copa Libertadores title, scoring twice in the final against Penarol. By October, he was in Lisbon, trying to become world champion at club level in the Intercontinental Cup. In holding five trophies simultaneously, the 21-year-old would have won everything it was possible to win, all within 12 months.

Standing in his way was Benfica and their own young superstar: a 20-year-old Eusebio. Pele had emerged triumphant in the first leg, notching twice in a thrilling 3-2 win at the Maracana. At Estadio da Luz, he put in one of club football's most memorable individual performances, posting a treble in a 5-2 win.

Santos retained all four club trophies, too. Pele scored the Libertadores-sealing goal against Boca Juniors at a hostile Bombonera, then twice at San Siro in the first leg of the Intercontinental Cup final, keeping Santos in the tie and giving them a chance to overturn Milan's 4-2 advantage back in Brazil. Already established as one of the greatest club teams of all time, Santos would go on to add a fourth and fifth consecutive Brazilian title.

As Campeonato Paulista top scorer for the ninth campaign in a row, Pele's career tally in ▸



THE MAN WHO DID IT ON A COLD NIGHT IN STOKE

Pele never played at Wembley, but he did take on a disparate collection of English clubs in his touring days with Santos.

O Rei's first match in England came in October 1962 against Sheffield Wednesday, when Santos were in Europe for their Intercontinental Cup clash with Benfica. Lengthy negotiations meant the Hillsborough friendly was announced at just a week's notice, with higher ticket prices, so the attendance of 49,000 was 16,000 under capacity. Pele scored a penalty in a 4-2 win.

In 1969 he was back for the ultimate test: proving he could do it on a cold Tuesday night in Stoke. He passed, putting a fine solo goal past Gordon Banks a year before they'd meet again in Mexico. Pele even returned to Stoke in 2008 to unveil a statue of Banks, the pair being joined by Desmond Tutu. Obviously.

Pele later played against West Ham in New York, Newcastle in Hong Kong, Chelsea in Jamaica and Coventry in Bangkok, but lost at Aston Villa, then of the Third Division. Hillsborough also welcomed him back [above], albeit for a midweek afternoon kickabout, as the miners' strike resulted in energy restrictions and therefore no floodlit games.

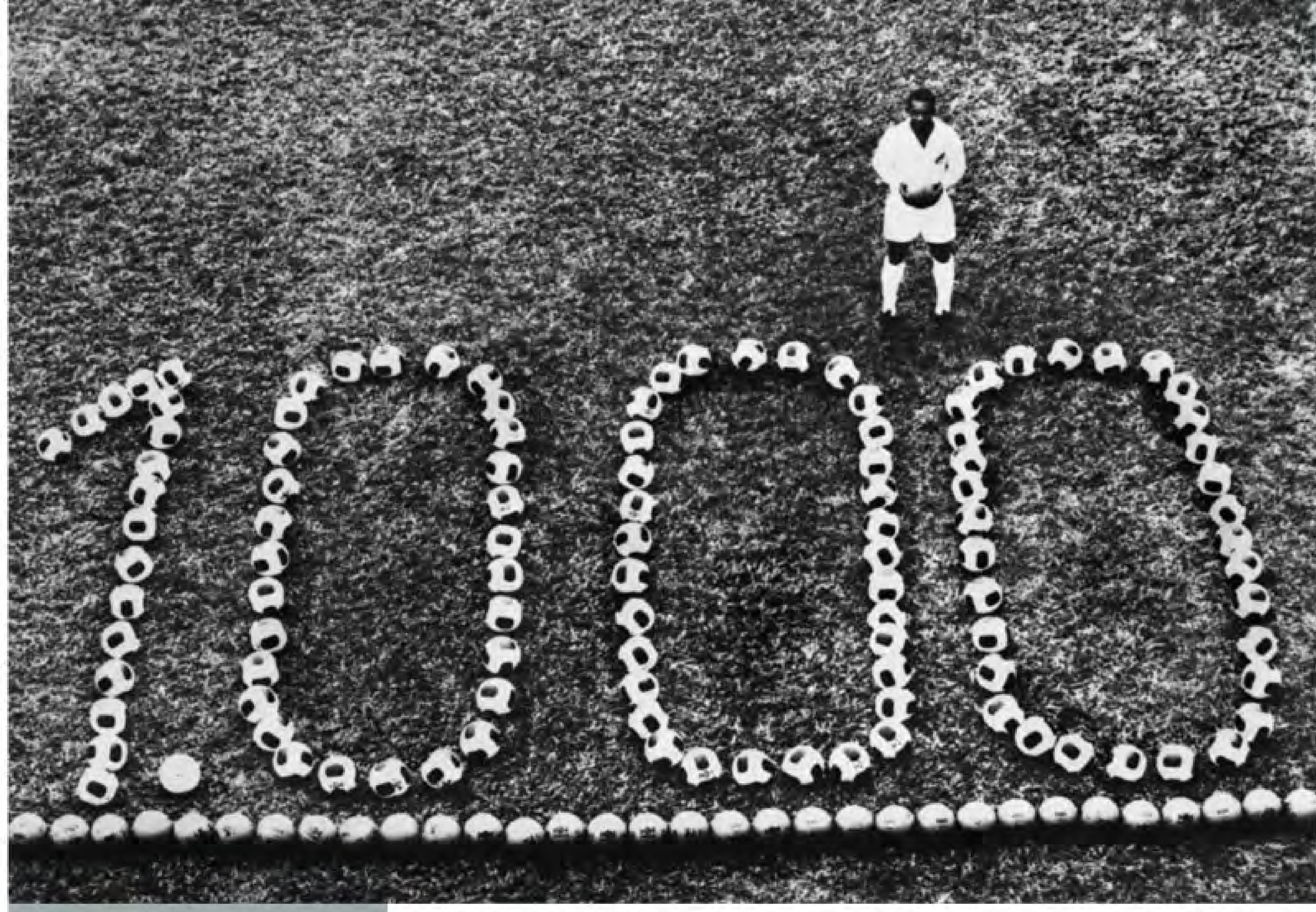
His last trip came in 1973 with losses to Fulham and Plymouth – the latter after Santos noted the 40,000-strong crowd and renegotiated their fee minutes before kick-off, threatening to pull out. "We'll report this – you'll never play in this country again," Argyle's chairman told Santos' representative. "Plenty more countries," was his calm reply.

competitive games now stood at 527 goals. Include friendlies – because Pele had by now made Santos so famous that they were invited to play all around the world – and it was 785 goals, or 87 per year. He was 25.

It was all going swimmingly, until Pele arrived at Goodison Park for the 1966 World Cup. He scored a free-kick in victory over Bulgaria but was targeted by rough-housing and heavy tackles, ruling him out of the second game against Hungary. Without him, Brazil lost 3-1. Pele was rushed back to face Portugal before being fully fit, and Brazil lost 3-1 again, their star reduced to limping about the pitch for half of the game having been repeatedly chopped down, while Eusebio exacted some personal revenge of sorts by scoring twice. Brazil, fancied to defend their title once again, went out in the group stage.

"It was my worst moment in football," Pele later told *FFT*. "I was very low. I thought that I would stop playing for Brazil. No more World Cups – three was enough."

Santos had a leaner few years, as Pele's strike rate dipped below a goal per game to more human levels. He did claim, though, that Manchester United made a failed bid to sign him in 1968, the year of their European Cup win. Best, Law, Charlton, Pele – it would have been a decent attack.





Top to bottom "Has anybody seen our training balls?"; magic at Mexico 1970

In 1969, still in his twenties, he scored *O Milésimo*: the 1,000th goal of his career. He'd been ready to get it a few days earlier, only to end up playing as an emergency goalkeeper due to a team-mate's injury. His landmark strike came against Vasco, from the Maracana's penalty spot. "People say, 'Why was Pele's 1,000th a penalty?'" he reflected. "But a famous journalist in Brazil wrote: 'God said, "The world has to stop and see this goal" – that's why it was a penalty'."

Pele continued, "He must have said, 'OK, let's stop the game and make sure everybody is watching'. If it had been from open play, some guy would've been eating his popcorn and missed it. I was there in the Maracana with 125,000 people and everybody started shouting, 'Pele, Pele'. My legs were shaking. I couldn't miss that penalty." He didn't. Fans ran onto the pitch and 1,000 balloons were released in celebration.

ESCAPING TO VICTORY

Months earlier, Pele had taken the decision to return to the national team, scoring six goals in six games during qualifying for the 1970 World Cup. "I was in good shape," he told *FFT*. "It was tougher, though, because the responsibility was on my shoulders. Two or three players had already decided to stop after that World Cup; Gerson and Brito said, 'This is our last World Cup – we cannot lose!' But Mexico 1970 was when I played my best for Brazil. Every game, I was at a high level."

Every game, Pele made a key contribution. Against Czechoslovakia, Brazil went behind, so he shook his side from their slumber by nearly scoring a breathtaking goal from his own half, then put them 2-1 up on the way to a 4-1 win – also making him the first player to score at four World Cups. Against England, he was denied by Gordon Banks but set up the only goal with tidy close control and an inch-perfect flicked pass to Jairzinho. Against Romania: two goals in a 3-2 victory; against Peru, beating the offside trap to put Tostao in;

"GOD SAID, 'THE WORLD HAS TO STOP AND SEE PELE'S THOUSANDTH GOAL'. THAT'S WHY IT WAS A PENALTY"



against Uruguay, another assist and almost a famous goal of his own, dummying to let a through-ball run past the goalkeeper and then darting around the other side of him, only to fire his shot just wide of the post.

And so, the final. The sumptuous nine-man move for Brazil's fourth goal against Italy still replays in lush technicolour on the insides of a generation's eyelids, but first Pele leapt high to open the scoring. "I scored that goal because, when I was young, I used to train heading the ball with my eyes open," he said. "I scored more than 100 goals with my head." This, despite being 5ft 8in – just an inch taller than Lionel Messi. And it was with his head that the Selecao's No.10 provided the pass for Jairzinho to add Brazil's third, before casually laying a perfectly weighted pass into Carlos Alberto's path for 4-1.

"Pele did everything possible at that World Cup," says squad member Edu. "His shot from the halfway line against Czechoslovakia, the unbelievable dummy against [Uruguay keeper Ladislao] Mazurkiewicz, the assists for Jairzinho and Carlos Alberto... He was out of this world; our best player and also the most humble one. He was a father figure to me – my idol. Our desire was to win a third World Cup for Brazil, because we knew that would mean the Jules Rimet Trophy would go back to our country for good."

That was largely down to Pele, the only player to feature in all three triumphs, and still the only man to win three World Cups. He may have played his final match more than seven years later as a celebrity in the USA, but his crowning glory came – as it did for Messi – in a sensational World Cup final towards the end of a career spent at the very top. In front of 107,000 fans at Estadio Azteca, the final whistle blew on Brazil's victory over Italy and joyous locals ran onto the pitch to anoint Pele with a sombrero. *O Rei*'s legacy was secure.

In essence, everything after Mexico 1970 was an extended victory lap for Pele. There was nothing left to prove. Still, he ticked a few milestones off the bucket list – taking the game to the States; acting in *Escape To Victory* opposite Michael Caine, Sylvester Stallone and John Wark; fleeing Nigeria dressed as a pilot, after hiding in a hotel with tennis great Arthur Ashe as they sheltered from an attempted military coup. His final match was an exhibition at New Jersey's Giants Stadium, with Pele playing the first half for his paymasters, New York Cosmos, and the second half for Santos.

Across his career, he scored 1,283 goals in 1,363 games, or a remarkable 778 in 846 even if you discount friendlies. In Pele's day, only European players were eligible for the Ballon d'Or but not long ago, *France Football* re-evaluated past awards and revealed that, if South Americans had been in contention, Pele would have won it in 1958, 1959, 1960, 1961, 1963, 1964 and 1970.

"Who, in your opinion, is the greatest player of all time?" *FFT* asked in 2005.

"Of all time?" replied Pele, looking puzzled at the question. "Pele. I admire him."

He was certainly not alone.







Above Brazil stood still for Pele's funeral procession and wake on the Santos pitch

"NOT A TEAR WAS SHED, ONLY JOYFUL MEMORIES"

Marvio dos Anjos was in Santos after Pele passed away, to witness the final farewell

A soft samba tune took hold of the loudspeakers at the Urbano Caldeira Stadium, universally known as Vila Belmiro, on the hot, humid morning of January 2. Written and sung by Pele himself, *Meu Legado* repeatedly told the people of Santos how grateful the king was to them: "I am Pele thanks to you; I am Pele, my legacy is to you."

At 10am, Santistas and foreign tourists from places as varied as Mexico, Malta and Japan began paying their respects in their own way. Black-and-white Santos jerseys and the yellow and green of Brazil were constants in the queue that crossed Vila Belmiro's pitch, at the centre of which Pele was laid, for a 24-hour wake. His coffin was protected from the unmerciful sun by a white canopy also hosting family members, close friends and VIPs; among them, FIFA president Gianni Infantino.

The press could watch it easily from the stands, but the true feeling of that day was down in the queue. One had to follow its serpentine course, which stretched for five blocks, to understand the reverence. Not a tear was shed, only joyful memories – together, everybody had arrived at the final stage of grief: acceptance.

A 15-year-old in front of me carried a special edition of the local paper from the day after Pele's death on December 29. "I'm here to honour Pele," Gustavo Luna told me. "My grandparents used to tell stories about him so fondly. My grandpa will surely come when the sun goes down."

Behind me in the queue, 66-year-old Samuel Lima Santos was with his son, remembering the three times that he watched Pele play. He could have seen him score against Corinthians in the early 1970s – "but I had to leave the stadium 10 minutes early to catch the last bus to my home town," he recalls. "Then came a penalty deep into injury time. I could only listen to the goal on the radio."

After more than an hour and a half in the queue, I entered the stadium gates to the sound of gentle samba and the scent of floral wreaths in the air. Pele's open casket was covered by flowers, as people were ushered past, saying their final farewells.

Pele was a man who granted Brazil an unprecedented sense of pride and meaningfulness. Meanwhile, the Selecao are now guaranteed to be without a World Cup trophy for at least 24 years. Living up to his legacy has never felt so challenging.

01 LIONEL MESSI

In Doha, the Argentine confirmed himself as the greatest. What does it mean at home?

Words Martin Mazur



Sunday, December 18, 2022, will always be remembered as the day that Lionel Messi became immortal.

It's a date that will be written in every sports book, celebrated and recreated in myriad ways. That day, football found a cosmic balance, offering one of its true greats the World Cup he'd been seeking since the start of his career. Messi finally touched the trophy at 35 years, five months and 24 days old. It was not just potentially the perfect ending to his World Cup career, but the start of a new life. An eternal life.

"¿QUE MIRAS, BOBO?"

In Argentina today, thousands of Messi tattoos are being inked, dozens of Messi street murals are being painted. Inscriptions of new-born babies under the names Lionel and Lionela have grown by 700 per cent.

The first Lionel Messi Street came in Uriburu, a tiny town in the province of La Pampa. Many more will follow. Soon, Argentine sat navs will have locals navigating between Messi Alleys, Messi Boulevards and Messi Avenues.

Millions of Instagram and TikTok posts have continued to share random Messi moments. With him, about him, dedicated to him, all have had the power to become a social media of its own: Messigram. If the internet became mankind's collective mind, Messi has become the collective heart and soul of Argentina's 47 million citizens.

Back home, the real effect of World Cup victory is still impossible to measure. So far there are mere hints, loose parts of a wider puzzle that few yet fully understand. Not just yet. It's too soon, too fresh. Messi has made an indelible footprint on Argentine society, prompting a debt of gratitude that will be paid every day, for eternity. The final in Qatar was like the Big Bang – it will be studied, dissected, theorised, told and retold for generations. The most spectacular World Cup final of all time ended in victory for the player who's shaped 21st-century football, against another, Kylian Mbappe, who could shape the next decade or more. ▶



"HE SUFFERED SUCH S**T. WE WANTED TO WIN FOR ARGENTINA BUT WE ALSO WANTED TO WIN FOR MESSI"

The team Lionel Scaloni assembled in Qatar functioned to perfection and featured key contributions from Emiliano Martinez, Nahuel Molina, Cristian Romero, Nicolas Otamendi, Nicolas Tagliafico, Rodrigo De Paul, Enzo Fernandez, Alexis Mac Allister, Angel Di Maria and Julian Alvarez. Yet it was Messi who stepped up and stole the show in every game.

A few minutes past 9pm in Doha, 3pm in Argentina, the captain finally lifted the trophy he'd dreamed of since he was a little kid. The only silverware that *really* mattered to him, more even than all seven Ballons d'Or lined up together. First receiving the player of the tournament award, then posing with it for photographers, he couldn't hide his anxiety. "Now bring me the cup!" he said to team-mates Enzo Fernandez (FIFA Young Player winner) and Emi Martinez (Golden Glove). Messi had already committed the sin of kissing and caressing the World Cup trophy, in what was probably modern football's most iconic love scene.

Argentines cried in front of televisions. Players and coaching staff cried on the pitch. Fans and journalists cried at the stadium. Everyone was crying, except for Messi. He just couldn't stop smiling. It was paradoxical, yet beautifully scripted. He'd cried so much in 2006, in 2010, in 2014 and in 2018, that shedding a tear was not an option this time.

"Do you know how many times I will kiss it, after all that I dreamed about this?" he soon said, handed the trophy he'd stared at in anguish eight years earlier, after losing the World Cup final to Germany at the Maracana. "The best, but not the champion," he told FIFA officials back then, in winning the Golden Ball as the 2014 edition's best player. Now, that cruel memory had been vaporised.

"Uff, it weighs a bit," he said, after finally picking up the trophy in Doha, presenting it to his team-mates, wearing the *bisht*, the Arabic black cloak that is now also part of football history. Traditionally reserved for warriors, it couldn't have a better meaning. Behind the artist, there was a fighter.

Episodes of his strong character had emerged in recent years, in what could be described as the Maradonisation of Messi, his transformation from a competitive and sometimes capricious 20-year-old, into this team's merciless apex predator.

In Qatar, Messi played with the guillotine dangling above his neck. After Argentina's shock defeat against Saudi Arabia in their opening match, they effectively ended up playing six knockout games. Each could have been Messi's last dance, but he rose to every occasion without fear, as a true quarrelsome general. After the tetchy quarter-final win over the Netherlands, he asked a passing Wout Weghorst, "*¿Que miras, bobo?*" ("What are you looking at, stupid?") on live TV, a phrase that now adorns T-shirts and tea cups nationwide – production has struggled to keep up with the market's demand. He also poked Dutch boss Louis van Gaal, hardly a shrinking violet himself.

"I always respect everyone and I like to be respected as well," huffed Messi. "Their manager talked a lot. He thinks he invented football, but all they did was play long balls to the tall guys."

In the last 16, the skipper squared up to Australia's Aziz Behich at a throw-in. Less than one minute later, he scored the opener. Angry Messi is the worst Messi that any opposition can possibly face, and one that makes La Seleccion fans go crazy.

"He dribbled, he showed amazing heart, he stood up, he swore," says Hector Enrique, part of Argentina's 1986 World Cup-winning side, and later assistant to Diego Maradona between 2008 and 2010. "Messi passed the spirit to the team. It was like watching Maradona on the pitch – it reminded me of 1986, a team that dribbled, attacked and defended the colours with their hearts."

THE WEIGHT OF HISTORY

Some people say the upgraded version of Messi started in winning the 2021 Copa America, which was supposed to be hosted by Argentina, only for the competition to be switched to Brazil because of the pandemic. In fact, the new Messi had first been seen at the previous Copa America in 2019, also in Brazil, even if Argentina didn't emerge triumphant on that occasion.

Then, as one of the few remaining survivors of Argentina's disastrous 2018 World Cup campaign, Messi led a young squad as a true captain, ranted about the organisation and CONMEBOL, criticised the referees and suggested that VAR favoured Brazil during their semi-final defeat to the hosts. In the end, he was sent off in the third place play-off after clashing with Gary Medel.

It was the first time he'd really managed to unite Argentina fans behind his leadership, regardless of age or beliefs. After that, the perception towards him changed forever.



Above "I've waited a long time for this"

Despite it all, the critics still existed, always ready to sow discord, when he scored five goals for Barcelona, or when he didn't score for the national team. At every Sunday barbecue in Argentina, someone would usually bring up the "He's great... but he never won anything with Argentina" argument.

Comparisons were tedious and unfair. It wasn't just a World Cup that Messi had to win, but a World Cup in which he single-handedly led an unremarkable team into an unlikely deed, like Maradona had in 1986, and almost repeated again in 1990. Anything

HONOURS LIST

11	7	4	3	1	1
DOMESTIC LEAGUE	COPA DEL REY	CHAMPIONS LEAGUE	CLUB WORLD CUP	COPA AMERICA	WORLD CUP



else would be considered unworthy. Olympic gold in 2008? Pah. The Under-20 World Cup in 2005? Individual records? Club statistics? Are you for real? Without admitting it, Messi became the founder member of this club of detractors, thinking that without the World Cup, nothing else mattered.

It wasn't only him but three generations of players who'd suffered that heavy post-Maradona burden, all tagged as losers under the management of Daniel Passarella, Marcelo Bielsa and Jose Pekerman just as Messi arrived on the scene in 2005. From Argentina's 1993 Copa America triumph there were seven defeats in finals, including two in the Confederations Cup. The last four finals had all come with Messi on the field, but Argentina hadn't scored a single goal.

Also present on each occasion was Javier Mascherano, now coach of Argentina's U20s. "In football, those who are remembered are the ones who win," *El Jefecito* ('the Little Chief') said recently. "Sadly, it wasn't our generation. We enjoyed important moments with the national team, but we didn't make history. We couldn't. I'm not ashamed of saying this, because only one wins. I lost."

Messi's believers were Millennials, but the older generations had a harder time coping with his genius. In the end, he managed to convince everyone, not by his victories, but by his behaviour after defeat. At one point, the battering was so much that it was hard not to empathise with the man who refused to surrender. Punches kept landing.

Messi does not have a religion created after him (well, not yet at least), but if he did, there would be a liturgy about his four stages with the national team: struggle, suffering, anger and glory.

His main commandment is just the one, learned after reversing a brief international retirement in 2016. "Until I have some breath, I will keep trying to fulfil my dream, to win a title with Argentina," he said. ▶

7	6	8	6	2	15
BALLON D'OR	LA LIGA PLAYER OF YEAR	PICHICHI (LA LIGA GOLDEN BOOT)	EUROPEAN GOLDEN SHOE	WORLD CUP GOLDEN BALL	ARGENTINE PLAYER OF YEAR



"It doesn't really matter how many times you fall, what matters is having the willpower to get up and keep trying. Maybe I will, maybe I won't, but I will try and try. I think this is the best example that the kids can have."

La Scaloneta was a journey to that victory. What started as a derogatory word, a cheap scooter guided by an inexperienced-yet-inspirational Lionel Scaloni, ended up being a trademark adopted by the players and embraced by the public. In 2019, nobody wanted to take charge of the national team. Fans had lost interest.

"It was a critical moment – the people and the team were apart, we had to restore the love for La Seleccion," said the Argentine FA president Chiqui Tapia.

PLAYING HIS CARDS RIGHT

Sean Eternos (*Be Eternal*), the Netflix series that told the story of Argentina's 2021 Copa America triumph, captured some of the unknown moments of Messi the leader. His tunnel talk before the final could have been written for Al Pacino in *Any Given Sunday* – he was articulate, passionate, introducing pauses when needed and then accelerating towards the end. It was... nuclear. God had given them another chance of winning at the Maracana, and they had to seize it.

Film director Juan Baldana created the series, which became the most watched in Latin America shortly before the World Cup. "The first thing I thought was to create a portrait of a leader who'd just been consecrated, but was still not perceived as such by most of the people," he tells *FFT*.

"He was a different kind of leader – not like Maradona, a leader made from mud. With our creative team, we wanted to humanise not just Leo but the group of players who finally won a tournament for Argentina, after 28 years."

One of the documentary's viral stories was away from the pitch, when players were sat around playing a card game, each guessing which tarot card they would draw. Every player had 10 guesses. Otamendi, Di Maria, De Paul and Papu Gomez succeeded. On his last guess, Messi said the five of cups, to see if he could finally break the curse of the four cups he'd lost with Argentina.

When they turned over the card, it was the five of cups – they celebrated like it was a goal. Some players, including Otamendi and Gomez, even got a tattoo of the card. "When we toured Europe to interview the players, we were welcomed into their homes and that gave us something extra," explains Baldana of the film-making process.

"When someone opens the door of their house, they can also open the door of their soul, their heart. We felt something special was going on with that group. Something bigger was coming.

"I remember we rang the bell, waiting for someone to open. To our surprise, it was Messi who opened. 'Hi, how are you? Come on in,' he said. Normality. Humbleness. Wow. It was like being over in Rosario. The TV was showing a cooking channel from Argentina. It's difficult to understand how such a star was so humble.

"I proposed to him to make a scene in which he put on headphones and listened to all the critics, then looked straight at the camera, ready to tell his truth. He got it immediately. We had to improve the audio quality so he suggested we move to his walk-in closet. Suddenly, we'd transformed it into a TV studio." After the premiere, Messi told Baldana the series was "spectacular", and that his kids loved it.

In Qatar, Baldana was working on another big project, but at the same time, felt as emotional as any supporter. "It was heroic, a 35-year-old showing the way as if he were 25, chasing after every ball to show the example," he said. "It was marvellous."

Months ago, when he was omitted from the 30-man Ballon d'Or shortlist after scoring only six league goals in his debut Paris Saint-Germain season in 2021-22, Messi seemed at the start of his decline into veteran status. Instead, he was a player transformed back to his very best. 'The Flea' scored in six matches, even before we get to the inch-perfect pass to play in Molina against Holland, or the way he turned Josko Gvardiol inside out to set up Alvarez against Croatia in the semi-final.

He was pipped to the Golden Boot in the final minutes of the tournament, but his seven goals at a single World Cup surpassed the tally of all but two players since 1974 – Mbappe, and Ronaldo in 2002. Now with 13 World Cup goals to his name, it took his overall total past Pele, too. Messi also scored a career-best 18 times in 14 appearances for Argentina during the calendar year of 2022.

One day, we will find out exactly what he said, just before Gonzalo Montiel's decisive penalty in the World Cup final to clinch the trophy for Argentina. Some suggest it was a request to Messi's grandmother. Others claim it was a plea to Maradona in heaven. He couldn't even run to hug Montiel, but collapsed on the ground. Half of the team stayed with him. Just as at the Copa America a year earlier, winning for Messi had become a driving force. "He suffered so much, we ate so much s**t, that he deserved it more than anyone," declared Emi Martinez. "We wanted to win for Argentina, but we also wanted to win for him."

For years, Argentina waited for victory from Messi, inspired by Messi. He had to dribble,

GOALS PER CALENDAR YEAR

Year	Goals
2005	3
2006	12
2007	31
2008	22
2009	41
2010	60
2011	59
2012	91
2013	45
2014	58
2015	52
2016	59
2017	54
2018	51
2019	50
2020	27
2021	43
2022	35

TOTAL
793
(Barcelona B and C not included)



he had to score, he had to save the team. In Qatar, the equation had been reversed – the team had to save Messi. It was a radical difference. De Paul became famous as the captain's on-field bodyguard.

Team-mates were Messi fans who'd looked up to him as kids. In 2016, Enzo Fernandez had penned an emotional letter to his hero, begging him not to quit the national team. "We don't deserve you, Leo," the 15-year-old wrote. Six years later, Fernandez couldn't stop kissing Messi after his group stage goal against Mexico restarted their campaign.

When Messi spoke, everyone was silent. If Messi was OK with a decision, no one would dare to question it. Alexis Mac Allister didn't like people calling him "ginger" – when Messi heard that some of the Argentina players were calling him that, he gently asked them to stop. No one ever did it again.

When Lautaro Martinez scored the decisive penalty against the Netherlands, everyone sprinted over to celebrate with him - except Messi, who ran alone to hug goalkeeper Emi Martinez, allowing the Inter striker to take the spotlight, after a difficult tournament in front of goal.

"A striker lives off goals and he's important for us, so yes, I wanted him to celebrate his own," Messi said afterwards.

"WE'LL NEED SOME MORE MESSI SHIRTS"

Copa90 director Eli Mengem was over in Argentina for the end of the tournament, and experienced the ecstasy of a country in awe of Messi. "We went to Argentina to find out once and for all where Messi stood in the hearts of Argentines, and whether this, surely his final World Cup, could change things for the better," explains Mengem. "What we found was that while his performances along the way were finally cementing his God-like status, Messi had won the hearts of the people long before that. It wasn't because of what was happening on the pitch, but off it.

"He had come out of his shell, standing up to referees, giving passionate pre-game speeches, mocking his rivals, celebrating with the fans post-match and reflecting the extroverted way of the Argentine people that truly made them love him. They finally saw Messi the extrovert, Messi the Argentine. Winning the trophy was just a bonus."

Ever since Messi's arrival as the Barcelona wonderkid, Argentines – supporters, players and managers alike – knew they'd received a gift. But every time he was called up, this special toy appeared to be fragile, without the instruction manual they badly needed. "So how do we play with Messi?" was the constant quandary.

Sometimes, the toy was returned broken to Pep Guardiola's Barcelona, who'd quickly put it together again. Managers came and went, frustrated at not being able to fully unlock Messi's potential on international duty, whether deployed as a right-winger, as a No.10, as a second forward, as a striker. Argentina mimicked Barça, but could barely produce a decent forgery – true, there were moments of brilliance, but also moments of confusion and sadness.

Clockwise from above "Don't worry, lads, I've got this"; Messi has always been a family man; the 2021 Copa America that began Messi 2.0

"HE'S COME OUT OF HIS SHELL, STANDING UP TO REFS, GIVING SPEECHES AND MOCKING HIS RIVALS"



Until Scaloni. Until the Copa America. Until Qatar. The toy has in fact evolved into the puppeteer. He wasn't broken at all, Argentina were. He healed a country, or at least, made people forget about what can't be healed – major problems with inflation and corruption, and a society fractured into two. Suddenly, nothing mattered – not when you've just been part of the Big Bang.

Celebrations were out of this world. After arriving back in Buenos Aires for a special parade, the team bus taking the players to the city centre could only move 12 kilometres in four hours. Players had to be evacuated in helicopters, after their safety was deemed to be at risk. Supporters tried to jump off bridges on to the top deck of the bus – one landed ►

RONALDINHO: SOOTHSAYER

Eighteen years ago, *FourFourTwo* went to Barcelona to chat to the world's best player. He told us we'd got the wrong guy

Messi had scored fewer than five goals for Barcelona when *FFT* interviewed the 18-year-old and his team-mate Ronaldinho in late 2005. The Brazilian could see the future.

"Best in the world? I'm not even the best at Barça," Ronaldinho said on the front cover of our magazine – a bold statement, considering he won the Ballon d'Or around the time of our visit.

Messi, by contrast, had only just made his debut for Argentina, but Ronnie had already seen enough to know how special he would become.

"One name I'd watch out for would be Lionel Messi," he told *FFT*. "He's like my little brother here – he might be from Argentina and I'm from Brazil, but I look after him. He's going to be excellent." That teenager became the best footballer in history.





Above Half of Buenos Aires headed to the city's Obelisk to watch the victory parade **Above right** "Come on then, motherf**kers, let's hear you!"

successfully, another missed and plummeted to the pavement. Rushed to an ambulance on a stretcher, he continued waving his arm in time with the chants. "Don't try to understand it. With the good and bad, Argentina, I love you," posted Messi on Instagram.

After two decades of Barcelona, Real Madrid, Chelsea and Inter shirts dominating the beaches in Argentina, this southern hemisphere summer has only had room for the sky blue and white of the national team. "I've never seen so many Argentina shirts on the beach in my life," admits Cacho Suarez, a local from Mar del Plata. Out of 20 jerseys he sees, 19 bear Messi's name on the back.

Mario De Stefano, Argentina's kit man for 25 years, knows the feeling very well. Dozens of people ask him if he has a spare Messi shirt every day. It's his burden. Marito, as everyone calls him, first met Messi in 2004. "A shy boy," he says. "Like all of them, the first place he hung out and drunk some *mate* [a high-caffeine South American drink] was the kit room. He's out of this world because he goes to bed thinking who he can help, and wakes up thinking the same thing. He's protected people that wanted to touch him, comforted kids that were crying behind security cordons because they couldn't see him. The number of Messi jerseys I'm asked for by other footballers and teams as the kit man is unprecedented."

De Stefano starred in a pre-World Cup advert from the national petrol company YPF, sending up his role dishing out Messi mementos. After fielding countless requests, he even receives an audio message from 'The Flea' himself: "Marito, do you have one extra Messi for me?"

The kit man became Emi Martinez's room-mate during last year's Copa America and continued sharing with him in Qatar, an example of the special bond that exists between players and staff. Messi invited the now retired Sergio Aguero, his room-mate since the 2005 U20 World Cup, to share with him ahead of the final. Players ruled out due to injury, like Giovani Lo Celso, Nico Gonzalez and Joaquin Correa, travelled to support the team and lifted the trophy alongside them.

Aguero had the special task of carrying Messi on his shoulders, while Argentina's star man held the World Cup – even if it was a replica, Messi would later find out. The most liked Instagram photo of all time? Well, it's not the real trophy, Di Maria had that in the centre of the pitch. It didn't really matter – Messi laughed when he found out.

He only appeared to show discomfort when condiment-sprinkling chef influencer Salt Bae tried to seize the moment, but gave a never-ending hug to a woman that many thought was his mum. No, it was the team's cook.

"The difference with Messi is his normality, the natural way in which he absorbs his role," explained Mascherano. "For normal players, this can be seen as simplicity, but it's most admirable when it comes from someone so extraordinary. We were lucky to play with him, just like others were lucky to play with Diego, Pele, Alfredo Di Stefano or Johan Cruyff. But seeing the world as it is today – the speed, the level of exposure that this kind of star receives – the simplicity of Messi is something that needs to be admired."

AT HOME WITH HIS £10 SLIPPERS

One could argue that Argentina owe more to Messi than Messi owes to Argentina, but the man himself appears eager to refute this assertion. In every game since 2021, the Copa America was celebrated like a touring rock band. Close to the fans, absorbing their energy, thanking them for all their support. Singing with them, as one of them.

"I can't explain it to you, because you won't understand, all the finals that we've lost,

FIVE MOMENTS THAT MADE MESSI A BARCELONA LEGEND

'The Flea' confirmed his Argentina legacy last year, but those in Catalonia have long since paid homage to his genius...



DIEGO IS THAT YOU?

Recreates Maradona's solo goal at Mexico 86 vs England, running from the halfway line to score against Getafe.



KING OF EUROPE

Loops home a rare header in Rome to clinch victory in the 2009 Champions League Final against Manchester United.



RECORD BREAKER

Becomes Barça's all-time leading scorer, with a treble against Granada in 2012. He is just 24, and isn't done yet...



THE NAME'S MESSI

His 500th Barcelona goal is a winner at the Bernabeu in 2017 – he holds his shirt up to Real Madrid fans to celebrate.



CLEAR OF THE REST

Nets in La Liga for 474th and final time against Celta Vigo in 2021 – 163 ahead of Cristiano Ronaldo in second.



how many years I cried for them," goes their new anthem. "But that's over now, because at the Maracana, the final with the Brazilians was won by daddy again."

The song *Muchachos* – created by a fan on social media and popularised until reaching the core of the team – is full of clichés, but it's catchy and respectful. Players adopted it as their hymn. So did the crowd. In Qatar, Messi sang it like every other fan, even though it mentions his name twice. Nobody could possibly think it was pretentious. Looking at the images of Messi's coronation, the magic was to make him feel like a fan, and to make the fans feel like Messi. Never before was an idol so close to the people, and so far away from his own aura.

Just before Christmas, Messi welcomed ex-Barcelona team-mate Luis Suarez and family to his Rosario home. The newly crowned champion was wearing a pair of Argentina slippers with the No.10 – a gift from a fan who'd made them specially for him last year, but couldn't have guessed that Messi would actually wear them. His surprise was even bigger when he opened the private messages in his Instagram account.

"Hi Luciano, all well? I'm Leo," wrote Messi, to the owner of a small venture that's now become incredibly popular. "I wanted to thank you for the slippers. They are super good, and so is the box. I'd like to see if you can make one for my sons and the pink Paris one for my wife. Sizes are 33, 29, 26 and [his wife] Antonela 35. Mine are 42/43. Sorry I've seen your messages only now!"

It is the beauty of Messi, not just the Louis Vuitton backpacks and Gucci pants, but also enjoying the £10 slippers. The very same day, Cristiano Ronaldo posted a picture of his Christmas present, a Rolls-Royce.

"MESSI MAKES US PROUD, NOT JUST AS A FOOTBALLER – SOME PEOPLE HAVE BEEN TOUCHED BY GOD'S HAND"

Roly Santacroce, mayor of Funes, a town near Rosario, was one of the first people to meet with Messi after the World Cup victory, to declare him as an 'illustrious citizen'. "For us it was the most beautiful circumstance of paying an homage to the world champion, but also to the family man who'd decided to build his house in our town," Santacrore tells *FFT*. "It was a moment full of emotion, as me and my two children had the privilege of representing our country in such a joyful moment that we will cherish for all our lives. Messi makes us proud, not just as a footballer. Some people are touched by God's hand. His humbleness is so big that you can forget that he's Messi. We shot a video and he even apologised to the people of the city for not being able to reply to all the shows of love and affection. Can you believe it?"

Before New Year's Eve, one band that had dedicated a song to the players, La T y La M, received a phone call inviting them to perform at Messi's party. It was Antonela. "She told us it was a surprise for Leo," says lead singer Tobias Medrano, who has Messi's autograph tattooed on his arm. "For us it was like, 'What?!' One thing that struck me was Messi asking us to take a picture. *He* was asking *us*. It was like the world was upside down."

When Messi was given the microphone at the Lusail Stadium after his victory, it wasn't the banal "Football Is For All" FIFA slogan, but a regular fan's celebrations, including a 100 per cent Argentine insult for added effect. "*¡Vamos Argentina, la concha de su madre, somos campeones del mundo*!" ("Come on Argentina, motherf**kers, we're the world champions!") To many it was the perfect ending, even if there's already a plan to have Messi at the 2026 World Cup.

The journey to become the best Argentine ever – he now has the country's most caps, goals and World Cup appearances and goals – was as enthralling as it was sometimes traumatic. A rollercoaster of emotions that concluded in December, with two goals to conquer the greatest World Cup final ever. By 9pm in Doha, Messi had started a new life, as a man who'd fulfilled every single one of his boyhood dreams.

"I don't know if he had any debts – in my opinion, he didn't," said Scaloni after the final whistle. "He's the greatest of all time. Now, he's earned the right to do what he wants. If he wants to be at 2026, why not? There are 26 players – the No.10 is reserved and he has the right to decide. It's just three and a half years away."

Mission World Cup Six has already started. If he so desires, there are some extra records to be broken. Already though, his legacy is complete. From now on, Lionel Andres Messi just wants to have fun. As the greatest.

NEXT STOP, THE CHAMPIONS LEAGUE?

Keira Walsh enjoyed a majestic 2022, winning the Euros with England and joining Barcelona for a world-record fee, three years after she had nearly given up on football. The pass-master reveals how she revitalised her career

Words Chris Evans

You know you've had a decent year when someone decides to name a bus after you.

Keira Walsh's 2022 roll call is so all-encompassing, it borders on greedy. Euro 2022 winner. Player of the Match in the final, and selected in the Team of the Tournament. World-record transfer to footballing royalty, Barcelona. Yet for all of the team and individual prizes that the 25-year-old has amassed in the past 12 months, nothing represents the rapid growth in her profile like nominative transportation. 'Surreal' doesn't cut it.

The bus company, Rosso, run a service in the north west from Rossendale to Walsh's hometown of Rochdale. When the midfielder learned they had anointed one of their fleet in her honour, she thought it was a wind-up.

"My mum told me and I thought she was just messing around," she laughs, modestly. "I said, 'Come off it, there hasn't been a bus named after me – who'd do that?' Things like that are so out of the blue and out of the ordinary. But it's nice. It's cool and it's funny – definitely a conversation starter."

Ever since she impressed as the Lionesses' midfield metronome in their historic triumph at Wembley last summer, Walsh's life has been such a whirlwind that she hasn't found time to take a trip on her own bus yet. Being the world's most expensive player and turning out each week for a dominant force in the women's game will have that effect.

However, her journey to the pinnacle of the women's sport hasn't been without its roadblocks. Though her cultured midfield promptings suggest a player destined for the stars, Walsh admits in an exclusive sitdown with *FourFourTwo* that her ascent could have ended prematurely with her crashing back down to Earth, were it not for the support of people around her. Without them and the intervention of a sports psychologist, Walsh would have quit the game she loves, three years before her life-changing career apex.

"IT'S ABOUT TRYING TO FIND THE BEST VERSION OF MYSELF"

Walsh's annus horribilis arose from a post-2019 World Cup hangover. After England fell 2-1 to the USA in a hard-hitting semi-final, the constant barrage of criticism on social media – the majority of it from observers unfamiliar with the unfussy ball retention that defines her game – left Walsh, aged just 22 and playing for Manchester City, prone to self-doubt.

"I thought about not playing again," she reveals to *FFT*. "I had conversations with my managers at the time, and if it wasn't for [then-Manchester City boss] Nick Cushing, I think it would have been a lot more serious of a thought. He really understood me and got the best out of me.

"He said, 'Let's take it one training session at a time. There's no pressure – I only want you to enjoy your football'. Just having that conversation helped. I came off social media – I still don't read Twitter now – and spoke to a psychologist, which helped so much. If I hadn't taken those steps, I'm not sure any of this would have happened. It might not be for everyone, but it worked for me; that's the path I took and it's had a positive effect."

Walsh's new coping methods, backed up by regular sessions with psychologist Kate ▸


Spoti
21



"I WAS ALMOST PLAYING ON INSTINCT IN THE EUROS FINAL AGAINST GERMANY"

Green, ensure there's been no repeat. Sarina Wiegman's arrival as Lionesses manager in 2021 bolstered her renewed self-belief.

The true test of Walsh's outlook came last July, as England hosted Euro 2022 in their first major tournament since the 2019 World Cup. Having home advantage only added to the soaring levels of scrutiny that followed early wins. Far from wilting under pressure, Walsh grew in confidence as the competition went on, playing all but four minutes as the backbone of England's six perfect matches.

Her crowning moment came in the final. Picking up the ball midway inside her own half on the hour, Walsh threaded a delicious through ball for Ella Toone to chip into the net – a pass every bit as brilliant as Kaka's gold-standard assist to Hernan Crespo in the men's 2005 Champions League Final. One pass turned eight Germany defenders into mannequins; the vision, exquisite. England won 2-1 in extra time and Walsh's all-action display saw her named Player of the Match.

"I spoke to my psychologist about how, especially at the World Cup in 2019, I was so afraid to make a mistake that I wasn't the best version of myself and was holding back a bit," she explains of that sumptuous assist. "Playing under Sarina massively helped, too, because she gives me the confidence to try things, which is what I need.

"My psychologist says I'm at my best when I'm on my front foot, trying different passes and threading balls through on the edge of the box to dictate the play. It's about trying to find the best version of myself, in a zone where I'm almost not thinking and everything I do is very natural.

"That's how I felt in the Euros final against Germany. I wasn't really thinking too much about anything I was doing; I was almost playing on instinct. Speaking with her [Green] helped hugely, and I read books, listened to podcasts and did loads of preparation leading up to the final. It wasn't a case of just turning up on the day and winning Player of the Match – plenty went into it beforehand, from fitness to psychology work. That's what got me to a place where I was on the day."

Walsh's openness speaks volumes about her inner peace: she's at ease with herself and happy sharing the secrets to her success. Talking about one's mental health is now more accepted, thankfully, though cynicism remains about seeking assistance.

"There's still a lot of stigma around it," says Walsh. "I was the same when I was younger: I'd say, 'Oh, I don't need a psychologist – I'm confident, I'm fine, I'll play and just do what I always do.' It doesn't always work like that.

Above Euros glory has given the Lionesses celebrity status











Clockwise from above Lifting one of football's better-looking trophies; the Euro 2022 Final brought out the best in Walsh; leaving City was hard... but it's harder to turn down Barcelona

"I'm open about it now, as I was in such a bad place in terms of how I was playing and how I felt that I wouldn't want anyone else to go through that. It's not something I'm ashamed of.

"I speak honestly to the girls about going to see a psychologist – what help I need and what works for me – but that might not be the same for some players. They might have different ways of switching off or building confidence. For me, it was a massive first step to even talk to a psychologist, and then to carry on meeting her."

THE POSSESSION OBSESSION

Walsh's approach is paying off with interest. Since 2019 she has gone from strength to strength, re-establishing herself as a vital cog in the Manchester City and England midfields, and earning rave reviews as she played a key part in her teams' quest for honours.

After her starring Euros role last summer, Walsh had a long list of suitors. It would take a special offer for her to seriously consider a move away from City – she joined the club as a 17-year-old back in 2014, and she and her dad both support them – but Barcelona struck a chord.

Desperate to retain the services of their influential midfielder, City dug in their heels, so Walsh found herself in the tricky position of having to "push a bit but not too hard", in order to avoid burning Manchester bridges. It eventually took a world-record transfer fee of £400,000 – gazumping the £300,000 that Chelsea paid Wolfsburg for Pernille Harder in 2020 – for Barça to persuade City to sell.

"My agent told me that the move to Barça was something they'd spoken about before the Euros began, but I wanted to concentrate on England," Walsh tells *FFT*.

"Once the Euros had finished, conversations could start, but I had a Champions League game for City so I tried to forget about [the transfer fee] and try to focus on playing well for City. I didn't want it to distract me as I'm a City supporter and I wanted to leave the club in a good place. I was really happy when the bid was accepted."

Walsh had come close to leaving Eastlands during her 2019 crisis of confidence, amid overtures from Lyon and Atletico Madrid, but her former boss, Cushing, talked her round. Three years on, the lure of the Catalan capital proved impossible to ignore.

Walsh's affinity with Barcelona began at an early age, thanks to her dad's insistence that she watch Pep Guardiola's all-conquering Blaugrana team to study the tiki-taka game that dominated La Liga and European rivals. As a midfielder herself, the youngster would soak up how players like Sergio Busquets and Xavi used the ball, surveying and sashaying as they went. Her Barcelona infatuation went beyond on-pitch imitation; it also created an allure off it. This was the right club for Walsh at the right time.

"I thought I was too young to move to Lyon and be challenging for a starting place there," recalls Walsh of 2019. "At that age, I needed to be playing week in week out and exposed to the top players, to push on. Competing and maybe sitting on the bench wasn't the best ▸

option – even though I'd have been playing alongside world-class players.

"My dad also believed that I should stay at Manchester City rather than join Atletico or Lyon, which was a big factor in my decision because I really respect his opinion. When Barcelona came calling, I spoke to him about it and he agreed that it seemed like the right time to take the next step in my career and come out of my comfort zone.

"After the Euros, I felt like I was in a great place mentally and had a good tournament, so I was confident when coming in here that I could make my mark. I'm still settling in and haven't performed at my best yet, but I'm in a positive place at the moment and hopefully that will come soon."

The transfer wranglings resulted in Walsh only completing her move shortly before the summer transfer window shut in September. She has been getting up to speed ever since. While that does come with its advantages, such as avoiding the new-signing initiation of singing in front of her team-mates, it also meant that she was immediately flung into action as Los Cules attempt to lift their fourth successive Liga F title and win the Women's Champions League for the second time in just three campaigns.

Throw in Spanish lessons, making a home for herself in Barcelona and socialising with her new team-mates, and it's no wonder Walsh hasn't had time to properly digest her new status as the most expensive female footballer on the planet. Getting to grips with a new style of play is quite enough. Does she see herself as a good fit for Spanish football?

"In terms of being a technical player and my understanding of the game, yes – but it's still very different here," responds Walsh. "The way I was coached at City was to stand still a little bit more, open up the passing lanes for other people and let the centre-backs step in. At Barça, they want me to be an option and constantly moving, still showing for the ball even if I'm marked.

"Trying to switch from that style of standing still to moving around all of the time is a bit different. Barça play loads of short passes, whereas I tend to play a lot of longer passes – especially with England – so those subtle tweaks have been really refreshing to learn something new. In terms of technical ability, I feel like I'm in the best place to improve.

"It's about understanding. We watch clips to understand how we can bring things into our game. Much of how the coaches want the midfield to play together is about having a relationship with each other and developing that understanding. It's about trying not to force it; this is just something they want to happen naturally."

"THEY APPRECIATE GOOD FOOTBALL HERE, WHETHER IT'S THE MEN OR THE WOMEN"

Off the pitch, Walsh's integration into Barça life has been smoothed by having a couple of familiar faces nearby. England team-mate Lucy Bronze – and her six-year-old West Highland Terrier, Narla – joined the Catalans from Manchester City before the Euros got underway. Was Bronze's presence another big factor in Walsh's move to the Camp Nou?

"It definitely helps, but I would have come to Barcelona whether there was an English player here or not," she insists. "It certainly made the transition easier, though, because if I've needed help with anything, Lucy was there, and she'd been here since pre-season so she knew the ropes.

"The decision would have been to come here whether Lucy was at the club or not, but it did help a bit and it still does now, because she understands a lot more Spanish than I do at the moment."

One thing Walsh has had to adjust to is the higher profile that the women's game enjoys in Barcelona. While there has been a boom in popularity in England in recent seasons – especially after the Euros win – it has a very different status in Spain, as witnessed when more than 91,000 fans turned out for Barça's Champions League quarter-final against Real Madrid last March. That world-record crowd was no flash in the pan, either.

"People just appreciate and love watching good football over here," explains the 54-cap Lioness. "It doesn't matter if it's the men's team or the women's team out on the pitch – as long as they can see we're playing the Barcelona way and it's a nice game to watch, the supporters appreciate that.

"There are fans outside the training ground asking for pictures and signed shirts, which I'm not really used to. At Manchester City, we didn't have people waiting for us – it was only for the men – but it's different here.

"When I've been out for dinner with certain players, they're always getting recognised, and that's not something we get so much in England; after the Euros success, maybe, but it wasn't the case before that. The girls here are getting recognised purely on a club level, and it shows how much people appreciate the women's team."

It's a level of notoriety Walsh is quickly growing accustomed to, whether it's being asked for selfies on the streets of Barcelona or having a bus named after her in Rochdale. Compare it with those thoughts about giving up football a few years ago and it's been one hell of a ride to get here, but the latest leg of her journey is only just beginning.



"FANS HERE RECOGNISE THE PLAYERS OUT AND ABOUT, PURELY ON A CLUB LEVEL. ENGLAND ISN'T LIKE THAT"





Above "So, do we all get free Spotify here?" **Right** It ain't the size of the dog in the fight, it's the size of the fight in the dog **Far right** "Now now, Keira, that doesn't look like a short pass..."



In three years, Mikel Arteta's non-negotiables have taken the Gunners from a toxic crisis at his December 2019 arrival to a fierce battle with Manchester City at the summit of the Premier League. *FFT* speaks to players, coaches and fans to find out how the Basque did it



MIKEL ARTETA

ART*istic* ET*iquette* A*rsenal*

Words Mark White
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When Pep Guardiola's name appears on your phone, you take the call. You stop what you are doing. He demands nothing less than your sole focus. It's as if he's put the rest of the world on mute for the duration he has your attention.

Mikel Arteta first met this hypnotic man many years earlier. He had grown up idolising this magician who could bend space, time and football to his will, long before the Catalan coaching *sensei* learned to choreograph whole teams to do the same. A 16-year-old Arteta would make his Barcelona B debut as a substitute for Guardiola, then-club captain and 11 years his protégé's senior. The former never made a senior Barcelona appearance but, with the pair both schooled by Johan Cruyff principles and with a contacts book in common, they kept in touch. And, a decade and a half later, Arteta received the call that would adjust his career's sails.

It was now April 2012. The days were getting longer and Arteta's first season wearing Arsenal red and white was drawing to a close. Guardiola wasn't ringing to offer his fellow La Masia alumnus a job – that was another conversation for another timeline. He had simply rung an old acquaintance to pick his brain about Chelsea, Barcelona's next opponents in the Champions League.

Arteta gave his two cents. He explained succinctly the strengths and weaknesses of an outfit he had recently helped Arsenal to humble 5-3 at Stamford Bridge. He had even set up Robin van Persie's injury-time hat-trick goal. Pep listened intently. "I must ask his opinion more often," he said as he hung up.

As compliments go, there are few bigger in the game than the most revered manager of a generation asking for a tactical take from an uncapped 30-year-old midfielder. It was an early endorsement of a football mind that Guardiola would mine on a regular basis.



"FIRSTLY, I'LL HAVE EVERYONE 120 PER CENT COMMITTED – IF NOT, YOU DON'T PLAY FOR ME"

Clockwise from top When Rangers had Stephen Mangan in midfield; "Mikel, give us your Blue Steel"; winning the Toffees fans' hearts

"THAT WAS SO ARTETA"

Guardiola grew up fascinated by British football's romance and passion, admiring from afar its stacked pyramid, cup replays and travelling support. Arteta never had the luxury of distance. Unlike his playing and coaching mentor, he didn't leave his boyhood club of Barcelona on his own terms.

A gap year away at Paris Saint-Germain in 2001-02 – playing alongside Ronaldinho, Jay-Jay Okocha, Mauricio Pochettino and other big names – culminated in Barça spitting Arteta out to Rangers. He was just 20. The midfielder picked up English with a Glaswegian twang and learned a few choice swear words, as those who have seen *All or Nothing* can testify, before returning home to San Sebastian and Real Sociedad.

That didn't pan out, either. In the early summer of 2004, La Real planned to build their midfield around Arteta and Xabi Alonso – childhood friends and neighbours on Calle Matia, a short throw-in from the Playa de la Concha city-centre beach where they once honed their craft – but within six months the Basque pair were opposing generals in the Merseyside divide. By January 2005, Arteta was a Blue and Alonso was a Red.

A cultured midfield metronome, able to break defensive lines with his eyes closed, was forged in British football's fire. Arteta learned to fight at Ibrox, then Goodison, winning Evertonian hearts just as much for his spirit when tempers rose as for his dictating of the match tempo in calmer moments. After seven and a half seasons, and with his 30th birthday approaching, he wondered if he would ever get his big move. In August 2011, Arsene Wenger answered.

"The impact of his time at Arsenal cannot be measured in passing or possession stats," Spanish journalist Guillem Balague tells *FourFourTwo*. "His stability as a personality was what Wenger needed at the time. One of his first games was 0-0 at half-time and no one spoke. Wenger moved to a corner to let Arteta talk for him – that was so Arteta."

Arsenal signed Arteta and Per Mertesacker – not to mention Park Chu-young and Andre Santos – in a deadline-day scramble that followed their infamous 8-2 humiliation at the hands of Manchester United three days earlier. Arteta was a replacement for the recently-departed Cesc Fabregas, at least stylistically, but more importantly he was a roll of gaffer tape for Wenger to stretch



over the leadership void in his squad, with its average age a little over 24. Arteta and Mertesacker felt like short-term panic buys at the time but both would go on to retire at Arsenal, having been pillars on which Wenger relied. The Basque would eventually take the captaincy in 2014; Mertesacker took it next.

"Mikel was a great character, nice to work with and passionate about football," former team-mate Lukas Podolski recalls, beaming, to *FFT*. "He was exactly the same as now: he gave 100 per cent. He hasn't changed."

Arteta treated his responsibility as skipper with the utmost sincerity, too. He was closer to a number of the coaching staff than his own team-mates, became a regular in the video analyst suite to discuss upcoming opponents, and fellow players would call him "gaffer" or "teacher's pet". Arteta would host barbecues in his own garden, and even here, his searing eye for detail remained. No fatty meat allowed – the get-togethers focused on combining team ethic with recovery.

Towards the end of his playing career, Arteta would study for his coaching badges, working with Arsenal's Hale End youth teams and the Welsh national set-up to attain his UEFA A Licence. His path was clear, even to those he trained with every day.

"Mikel had decided he wanted to become a manager, and he prepared everything for that," says Podolski, now 37 and playing for boyhood club Gornik Zabrze. "I saw, on and off the pitch, that one day he would become a manager. He had that vision."

In May 2014, Arsenal's in-house magazine asked Arteta about his coaching future.

"I'll have absolutely everyone 120 per cent committed, that's the first thing," he said. "If not, you don't play for me. When it's time to work, it's time to work, and when it's time to have fun then I'm the first one to do it, but that commitment is vital. Then I want the football to be expressive, entertaining. I cannot have a concept of football where everything is based on the opposition."

Once again, Pep Guardiola – managing Bayern Munich by then – was impressed. In November 2015, the former Barça boys crossed paths after Arsenal lost 5-1 to Bayern in the Champions League group stage, with Pep suggesting they should work together if he ever left Bavaria for an English side. Little did Arteta know that his pal was already in talks to replace Manchester City boss Manuel Pellegrini the following summer.

Arteta couldn't turn down Arsenal when they approached him in the dying embers of 2011's summer transfer window, but he simply had to five years later, when Wenger asked him to run the academy. For a second time, a Guardiola phone call had changed his life. Arteta was a regular sounding board for the Catalan while also completing his UEFA Pro Licence on the same Welsh FA course as Patrick Vieira, Freddie Ljungberg, Thierry Henry and Jurgen Klopp's Liverpool assistant, Pep Lijnders. Arteta and Lijnders got on famously, bridging the brewing City-Liverpool, Guardiola-Klopp rivalry.

"I loved every second," Lijnders tells *FFT*. "Mikel and I were in the same position at ▸



that time, him assisting Pep, me assisting Jurgen. Curiosity and respect – so many similarities. I'm happy for his route, his success, despite being competitors. I want people I respect to do well. He pauses before adding with a laugh, "Except against us."

ALL HAIL KING MIKEL

Arsenal considered handing a 36-year-old Arteta, still a Manchester City assistant, the keys to the club in the summer of 2018 as Arsene Wenger's successor. It would have broken the Premier League Richter scale.

As audacious as that was, Arteta had his admirers. He was adored at City, with Leroy Sané and Raheem Sterling publicly praising him after they cruised to a 100-point Premier League title. He talked the talk, had studied Guardiolaball up close, and he *got* Arsenal. It would have been akin to a popular backbencher assuming power. Instead, Unai Emery got the nod as the 'safe' appointment.

Emery was a horse for a Europa League course at a time when the competition was the Gunners' best shot at silverware and entry back into the Champions League. He was a square-peg coach, however, and, after 18 increasingly toxic months, the club again went fishing for another Basque boss.

"If Arteta had started managerial life away from City, it may have been a different path, but Guardiola's influence cannot be denied," Spanish football expert Balague tells *FFT*.

"He picked up a lot of how you relate to players – how *not* to relate to players, even. He learned from Pep, then added his own thing, which was influenced by his own playing career but also where he comes from.

"He comes from Gipuzkoa, one of the smallest provinces in the Basque Country, of just 700,000 people, and from there you've got Arteta, Emery, [new Wolves boss] Julen Lopetegui, Xabi Alonso... it's an unbelievable quarry of football-thinking talent. Every year the coaching federation gives 500 licences – to race to the top, you have to be very good."

Arsenal took the leap in December 2019 and appointed Arteta after all. If they were brave, he was bold, laying out his famous "non-negotiables" in his first interview and stating that the club had lost its way. Granit Xhaka came off the naughty step – and the transfer list – after twice telling some jeering Arsenal fans to "f**k off" at home to Crystal Palace two months earlier. Mesut Özil was reinstated as the creative hub, while record buy Nicolas Pepe was dropped for academy talent Reiss Nelson in Arteta's first game, a 1-1 draw at Bournemouth on Boxing Day.

Clockwise from below One of the core lobes in Pep's massive football brain; look who's back; "This is called a Venn diagram"

Arsenal gradually improved, taking steps forward and back intermittently. Pablo Mari and Cedric Soares joined in January, while a teenage Bukayo Saka glittered on work experience at left-back. The skeleton of a team was beginning to knit together, as Arteta overloaded his side with fresh ideas.

"Mikel is about every small detail," Cedric tells *FFT*. "He always tries to prepare with a lot of detail. In every game, too. Picking games when he's not [detailed] is easier!"

In that first half-season, however, detail became the downfall. After COVID-19 forced the world into isolation from March 2020, the Gunners lost consecutive fixtures to Manchester City and Brighton away, comprehensively out-thought and out-fought in both games. Arteta realised that his ideals were too ambitious for this group of players. Rather than trying to ad-lib attacking moves, he switched to a back three and religiously rehearsed patterns of play. Lockdown in an empty Emirates Stadium was filled with the sound of Arteta barking instructions to his men, often in multiple languages, as he micromanaged their attacking patterns.

"He's on it," says Cedric, "but the rest is down to the players. If he's prepared every week with a game plan, we can't complain about not having enough information."



"MIKEL IS INCREDIBLY DETAILED IN EVERY GAME. PICKING GAMES WHEN HE'S NOT IS FAR EASIER!"

As the 2019-20 campaign finally drew to a close, Arsenal fans got their first glimpse of how good this coach could be when a red-and-white low block ground out wins against Liverpool in the league, then in the FA Cup against Manchester City and Chelsea – the latter in the final, on a silent, sunny August afternoon at Wembley. Game plans were executed exquisitely and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang was the scalpel of the side's military organisation. It was vindication.

"Knowing what had happened to Unai – and this was not much later – you realised there was something there," remembers Balague of that FA Cup victory. "There was a lot of work needed but there was also a lot of improvement. Knowing that other big decisions were going to be taken, you were hopeful that the success could continue."

Aubameyang was rewarded with a new contract and Willian joined from Chelsea on a free transfer, and then head of football Raul Sanllehi left north London before the 2020-21 season began. The 'head coach' sign on Arteta's office door was replaced by the word 'manager' and, with Edu as technical director, Arteta bought defender Gabriel Magalhaes from Lille and midfielder Thomas Partey from Atletico Madrid.

The club's post-Wenger structure had drifted towards a network of transfer experts, but now the manager was absolute monarch once more. Arteta had the final say and Arsenal essentially celebrated King Mikel's coronation with his Wembley triumph.

His honeymoon, however, didn't last long.





"YOU DESERVE BETTER"

Christmas came late in 2020. The Gunners were winless in seven league games and faced a Boxing Day encounter with Chelsea, Arteta's recurring supervillains: his first home opponents, his cup final foes, and even the reason for Guardiola first asking his advice.

Willian wasn't fit. In came the fledgling Emile Smith Rowe to address a dearth of creativity, with Saka on the right and the pugnacious Gabriel Martinelli on the left. It felt a little like the last roll of the dice; at least if Arteta were to fall on his sword, he'd do so sticking to his principles. At the very least, these young guns were prepared to give that 120 per cent commitment.

"When he first came to the club, I went on loan to Huddersfield," Smith Rowe tells *FFT*. "He brought me into the office and said, 'I want you to go and gain some experience for the first team – I want you to come back as a man'. He could see I was so shy."

Smith Rowe was not a Hollywood No.10. Happy to hide under a floppy, blonde fringe, he shuffled awkwardly in the camera's gaze – and that was exactly what Arsenal needed in their rut. The difference between him and Özil, frozen out and soon to have his contract terminated, was stark. The 'Croydon De Bruyne' drifted from side to side to create overloads and help his team-mates, rather than demand the spotlight.

A week earlier, Saka had tweeted: "You deserve more, Arsenal fans," after a dismal draw against Southampton. Now, he was helping to seal three hard-earned points with a cheeky edge-of-the-area lob over Edouard Mendy in a 3-1 win – and Saka maintains to this day that he meant it. A new attitude was born, as Arteta's Arsenal learned to play with expression and, most importantly, trust in the youngsters at their disposal.

"When I returned from my loan, I felt much more confident," continues Smith Rowe. "Mikel pulled me in again and said, 'You've come a long way'. He said that he was really happy with me. He's just really good with young players: he speaks to us a lot, guides us and helps us individually. That's what you want as a young player."

Arsenal eventually stuttered and spluttered across the finish line in eighth place, with the 2020-21 season chalked down as a learning curve for all involved. For some supporters, the following campaign would be the first in ▶

THE FAN VIEW

***Arseblog*'s Tim Stillman calls what he sees in Arteta's Arsenal (so far)**

I WAS FULLY BEHIND GIVING THE JOB TO A ROOKIE MANAGER
We've never really gone for the obvious manager choice: Chapman, Mee, Graham, Wenger. We've always had left-field appointments – that's where Arsenal fit. Arteta really wanted this job and he was attainable. He shouldn't be, by rights, but he feels like an Arsenal man.

ARTETA COULDN'T HAVE COMPLAINED IF HE HAD BEEN SACKED
I don't think we were always on this path. Arteta made mistakes along the way – Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang's renewed contract, Willian joining, and perhaps he could have managed Nicolas Pepe better – but there was no one on the market we could get who could obviously do any better. The phrase I always use is that he couldn't have complained if he had been sacked. That second half of the 2020-21 season, when Martin Odegaard came in and Emith Smith Rowe started playing, gave us a better idea of the football that Arteta was trying to play.

THE SUMMER OF 2021 CONVINCED ME THAT THERE MUST HAVE BEEN A PLAN
I was very interested in our so-called 'underwhelming' signings. Some Arsenal fans were genuinely upset about Aaron Ramsdale, quoting his long-ball statistics – the same with Ben White – and I was thinking, 'Surely that's the point, though?' It couldn't just have been an accident. I thought, 'All right, he's seen something in these players and I want to see what it is'. Our win against Burnley in September last year was the one: we played very differently, with Thomas Partey set up as the deepest midfielder. I was convinced quite quickly after that.

ARSENAL ARE IN A TITLE RACE
Arsenal are in a no-lose situation. It's easy to compartmentalise if we lose to Manchester City: it's not like last season, competing against Spurs. Every six or seven years, though, a window opens for a title win when everyone is in transition. There is another part of me that thinks if we don't do it this season, we won't have another opportunity for a long time...



living memory without European football, as a young squad learned on the job alongside their manager. However, Balague doesn't believe that the Arsenal board were ever close to pulling the plug on Arteta.

"You just have to go by what you hear," he explains. "Things take time and they were willing to wait. I didn't see any indication they were looking anywhere else; you know if a big club like Arsenal are going for a big manager like Lopetegui or Luis Enrique. Manchester United spoke to both, for instance. But there were no calls to vacant managers – nothing. They backed him, big time."

Arsenal doubled down on the manager's ideals, turning Martin Odegaard's loan spell permanent with an eye to making Real Madrid's playmaker the prototypical Arteta footballer: young, deft, clever on the ball and in space, and someone for team-mates to look up to. The Norwegian received the No.8 shirt and was told by his new manager, the shirt's former owner, to take care of it.

"Every day, I'm learning something new," Odegaard tells *FFT* of life under Arteta. "There are so many details – body position, how to control the ball – and it helps us to improve. He's not just telling everyone what to do; he's teaching us why. It helps the team to understand and to improve."

Odegaard became the nucleus in the centre of the pitch. Aaron Ramsdale, fresh from double-relegation at Bournemouth and Sheffield United, arrived in goal to much keyboard-warrior furore, with Poole pal Ben White a £50 million centre-back signing from Brighton. Little-known Albert Sambi Lokonga and Nuno Tavares joined the Londoners, too, as midfield and left-back cover respectively, and ambipedal Japanese international Takehiro Tomiyasu completed the overhaul.

Then came the club's worst start in Premier League history. Arteta's second full season in charge opened with an infamous string of back-to-back-to-back defeats: after Brentford bullied the Gunners on opening night, insipid losses to Chelsea and Manchester City rooted a shell-shocked young side to the foot of the table. Again, Arteta's position came under threat. Again, the board backed their man.

"The most interesting thing is that the board has given him time," Podolski tells *FFT*. "Everyone was saying, 'We have to change the manager. Why did they bring him in?' But he trusts in the process. Everyone works for one goal and now you can see what good scouting, transfers and decisions can do. When you trust in the process and everyone works together, then anything is possible."

Coaching buddy Lijnders agrees. "He is transforming the club," he says. "There isn't a bigger compliment in football."

A VISION APPEARS

Arsene Wenger hasn't been back since his retirement in 2018, neither to the training

MIKEL'S GENERALS

We name five key players in Arteta's three-year Arsenal tenure – some less obvious than others



GRANIT XHAKA

In his first week on the job, Arteta convinced Xhaka to stay; ever since, the Swiss midfielder has been loyal to his manager and fulfilled every kind of tactical tweak, dropping into the backline, moving to left-back and becoming box-to-box. Finally, he is receiving his plaudits.



ALEXANDRE LACAZETTE

The manager's friction with Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang was well-documented, but Laca quietly went about his job up front, working tirelessly, to become a leader. He might not have had Auba's spark, but his professionalism will be remembered fondly by Arteta.



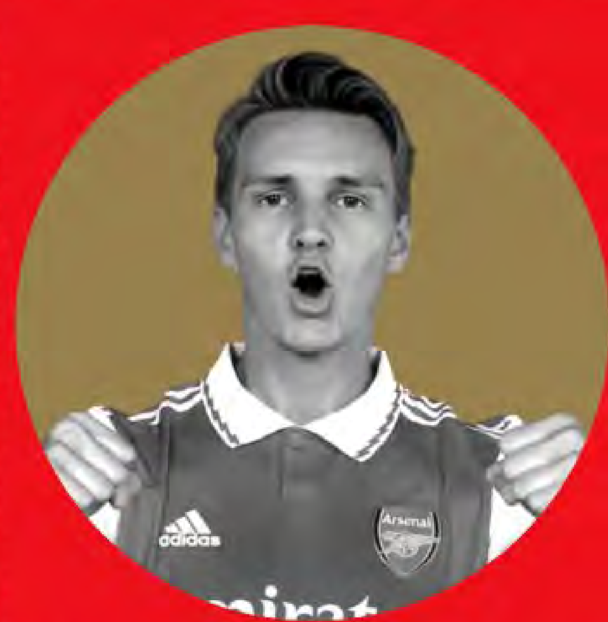
ROB HOLDING

The assembled hordes of Genghis Khan couldn't breach Arsenal's defence with sub Holding as a fifth defender. Another amiable leader, the Bolton Baresi is invaluable for shoring up 1-0 leads and setting the bar as Arteta's most selfless team player – all in brief 15-minute bursts.



BUKAYO SAKA

Saka began under Arteta as a makeshift left-back and went into the World Cup as one of the planet's best right-wingers. The starlet is virtually an ever-present, and his decision-making and maturity are the bedrock of everything Arteta wanted to build around in his attack.



MARTIN ODEGAARD

Just a year after signing for Arsenal permanently, the Norwegian could cite Arteta as his longest-serving boss. The wonderkid-turned-captain has settled down from years of development on loan, crystallising into a rounded midfielder and the heartbeat of this brave new Arsenal.









ground nor the stadium he helped to design. It's for the best, in many ways, that a ghost of such honeyed nostalgia refuses to linger in Arsenal's marble halls, presiding over teenagers who will make mistakes as well as memories. Nonetheless, the current crop do high-five the Frenchman every day in training.

An eventful year on from the miserable, behind-closed-doors autumn of 2020, when Arteta clung to the wheel like a ship captain lost in a sea storm, the Gunners boss asked for a Wenger mural to be installed at Colney: an image of his former mentor, raising one hand, for Arsenal players to tap on their way past. It felt fitting that as this new team began expressing themselves on the pitch, while the club culture was revolutionised from *laissez-faire* to labour-intensive, players should be reminded of the legends who have preceded them.

Arteta's vision started to appear from the haze of that catastrophic opening. His team went eight league games unbeaten, playing bravely and expansively, as the manager looked for new ways to motivate a young team. For example, before a trip to Liverpool – albeit one that ended with a 4-0 defeat – Arteta notoriously pumped *You'll Never Walk Alone* onto the training pitch to simulate Anfield's unique atmosphere for his players.

"We were all a little bit confused when we could hear the music on... then we saw the speakers," Odegaard laughs now. "Anfield can be the loudest stadium in this country. It was a nice way to prepare the team.

"But Mikel is very creative. He will always do what it takes to prepare the team as well as possible. It's always interesting to be in

"ARSENAL TOLD ARTETA THAT, WHATEVER HE DECIDED, THEY WOULD BACK HIS BIG DECISIONS"

Clockwise from top "We're all winners here"; Ramsdale has shone for Arteta; "And this is how you work a string puppet"; beating Chelsea away in November: nice

a meeting with him: you can learn things, pick up new things, and there's so many details in the game he will teach you. It's nice to learn so much about football."

Arteta drafted in a coaching team, too, who would all take responsibility to talk to these burgeoning young men on a personal level as well as a footballing one. Mental health, self-confidence and settling in a foreign land were all topics brought to work. The gaffer dedicated his Manager of the Month award for September 2021 to the coaching staff by his side, in recognition of their efforts.

"As a young man, it's difficult to open up to someone you don't know that well," Smith Rowe says of Carlos Cuesta, Arteta's youngest coach at just 27. "But it was good to speak with him. He's someone I got along with straight away when I first met him.

"I don't know what it was that made me open up, but I thought, 'Let's see how it goes'. It's not only me he has helped; he's helped other players and it's good to have someone like that, knowing you can go to them. Not just him, either: you can go to the manager, the assistant – you can speak to anyone."

Fittingly for a young team, Arsenal found themselves flitting between brilliant and bumbling as the season wore on. There was no in-between: they drew just three Premier League games throughout 2021-22, the fewest in the division. This bunch would either tear opponents apart like laser-guided Red Arrows, displaying imagination, passion and fluidity of movement, or they would look like lost souls in a departure lounge, frozen by fear, waiting for an announcement to inform them of their gate. They could give you life, they could take it away – sometimes in the same half of football.

The older heads weren't exactly helping. For all of his selfless industry, Alexandre Lacazette would register two non-penalty goals all campaign, while in January 2022, Aubameyang's deal was terminated after one too many training no-shows. Arteta's "non-negotiables" had been compromised. Some questioned the harshness of this stance with his captain, while others were again furious, 12 months on from Özil's exit, with a supposed leader.

"He'd seen it before under Guardiola and in his playing career – you have to be brave," Balague tells *FFT*. "The club told him that whatever he decided, they would back him up, and big decisions were taken."

The bravery wasn't just in letting Auba leave, but in choosing not to strengthen up front, essentially leaving Arteta utterly unarmed against critics if his inexperienced team should fail to finish in the top four.

Narrative dictated that it had to be Spurs who pipped Arsenal to the final Champions League spot. A spectacular spring collapse, including four losses in five from mid-March, preceded a mini-revival for Arteta's men, but that was ended by back-to-back defeats at ▶

Newcastle and Tottenham in May. Pundits theorised that Arsenal would get few better chances. The youngsters begged to differ.

"Our mentality is our best quality," Gabriel Martinelli tells *FFT*. "We have a young team, but age is not everything, and our mentality is amazing. We go into every game with the same mentality to win."

The bruises healed quicker than expected.

"THIS IS OUR FAMILY"

Arteta often talks about suffering. He has certainly suffered for the career he has built. Serious knee injuries ruined his chance of playing for Spain when he was on the brink of a call-up – he almost defected to England – while the biggest regret of his playing days is that he was too cerebral to properly enjoy them. From the dugout, he'll tell players they must be prepared to suffer without the ball and embrace the hard slog as motivation.

Arsenal *have* suffered in recent years, not least without a top striker, especially when heading into Champions League races opposite one-time Gunners youth-teamer Harry Kane. Arteta waited patiently for the right man and this summer Gabriel Jesus arrived, closing a circle from the manager's Manchester City days. Arteta's chosen No.9 was never going to have Kane's precision – few do – but he drives, he drifts, he dribbles and, ultimately, he runs. And that's enough.

His goal return is decent but unspectacular: five by the mid-season break, albeit from a total xG of 9.38, representing the Premier League's largest underperformance by any player and continuing a trend from his Etihad Stadium days. Yet fans love him, because he burns himself into the ground for the cause.

"Everyone can see the team's spirit," says the Brazilian, smiling when *FFT* posits that Arteta, a demanding whipcracker, would prefer his work rate over his ability. "You can see the way we love each other, the way we want to help each other on the pitch."

Indeed, fellow Brazilian Martinelli saw the introduction of a new striker as an aid to him rather than an obstacle. "I see myself more as a left-winger but I can play on the right as well, or as a striker," he insists to *FFT*. "I love to play with Jesus because he loves moving.

"He goes to the left, I can move central. It's very good to have that movement and it helps the team as well."

Jesus agrees. "This is our family and this is why it works so well," he says. "I spend more time here than at home. Absolutely everyone here is like this."

Jesus wasn't the only summer bargain that Arteta picked up from his former club. Left-back Oleksandr Zinchenko has been instrumental to Arsenal's evolution this season. The coach demands the Ukrainian and right-back White slide inside when the Gunners have the ball to form a midfield three either side of Partey, which in turn protects centre-backs Gabriel and William Saliba from counter-attacks. Providing a shape which keeps the opposition under constant pressure, this back five also supplements a fluid attacking five of Martinelli, Xhaka, Jesus, Odegaard and Saka. A rejuvenated Xhaka has licence to maraud as a de facto inside-forward from the left, and by November he had had equalled his best goalscoring season in an Arsenal shirt.

This feels more like a finished team than it ever has under Arteta, and not just the bones of something for the future. Second in the table with three games to play (at the time of writing) and just a point behind Manchester City is a nice place to be – with or without a winter World Cup as distraction.

Six years on from Pep Guardiola asking Mikel Arteta to work with him – plus another four from that fateful phone call when the master realised the apprentice's tactical nous – are the pair embroiled in a title race?

"It's great to be where we are," Arteta smiled coyly before the break. "We have to reflect on what we are doing, and be very much prepared for what is going to come. I can say that it has been phenomenal to work with these players and staff."

It's been some journey. And there's no need to merely *trust* this process any more. Arteta's vision is there for all to see.

Below "I turned Haaland down, Gabi, I promise" **Bottom** Jesus is a leader for Arteta's Gunners





"EVERYONE CAN SEE THE TEAM'S SPIRIT AND HOW WE WANT TO HELP EACH OTHER"

IT'S NOT EASY BEING



Nobody grows up wanting to be an assistant manager. Even Tord Grip probably dreamed of train driving, rock stardom or brain surgery, before hitching his wagon behind Sven-Goran Eriksson. This job is neither sexy nor safe. Do well and your boss gets the credit, but if they get sacked, usually you follow them out of the door. Most management teams break up eventually – and even if you get on famously, that can also be intense.

"He's never off the phone to me," says former Republic of Ireland international Stephen Ward, who's brand new to the number-two business. A long-time Premier League left-back for Burnley and Wolves, the 37-year-old is now assistant at sixth-tier Brackley Town, and he's busy. "I can't go to bed at night without the last text off him, thinking something about training, or that game," Ward tells *FFT*. "We speak more to ourselves than we do our own families."

This may be a good season to join the ranks, however. Assistants are suddenly getting a rare go in the spotlight. Gary O'Neil and Michael Beale have taken their old gaffers' jobs at Bournemouth and Rangers. Pep Lijnders' new book is all over Liverpool's club shop. Manchester United have even commissioned a statue of Jimmy Murphy, the greatest assistant in their history. Then there's Pep Guardiola helping his former assistant, Mikel Arteta, to take Arsenal top of the Premier League at Christmas by selling him Gabriel Jesus and Oleksandr Zinchenko.

It's about time, too. Let's be honest here: few of us really know what these people do each day. Most roles within football are pretty self-explanatory – physio, analyst, ▶

TWO

The assistant manager hasn't been immune to football's frantic growth spurt. A modern number two's remit has evolved from fancy dress and banter to psychology, data, book deals and even subtle Machiavellianism

Words Si Hawkins
Additional reporting Arthur Renard

"PEOPLE ARE A BIT SLIPPERY IN FOOTBALL AND THEY'LL GO BEHIND THE MANAGER'S BACK"

first-team coach – but assistant managers? As Lijnders himself will later suggest, their jobs are defined by each boss.

Ward's Brackley gaffer is his former Wolves team-mate, Roger Johnson, and the dynamic is clearly working. They joined in September, Johnson having been on the backroom staff at Bromley, and have spent a large part of the season top of the National League North.

"I've seen managers with assistants over my career, and they're not what Wardy is to me," admits Johnson, during a revealing three-way discussion with his number two and *FFT*. "I trust him with my life.

"Football is an industry where people are out for themselves. They're a bit slippery. They'll sort of go against the manager behind their back, saying, 'I think you should have done this...' We've got complete honesty."

Humble, loyal, hard-working: that's the classic number two. The perfect example is the subject of that statue at Old Trafford. Jimmy Murphy was Sir Matt Busby's rock, rebuilding the Manchester United team after the 1958 Munich air disaster that claimed 23 lives, including those of eight players, having missed the trip himself while helping Wales to qualify for their first World Cup. Murphy's eventual departure in 1971 isn't mentioned enough as a factor in United's decline; such a stalwart would surely be missed.

In 2016, Sir Alex Ferguson wrote *Leading*, a book about management techniques that suggests it's almost an art form. "Some characters are more suited to being second in command," he wrote. "I would have been a terrible number two because there is a part of my personality that needs to be the leader. It takes considerable skill to be content as second fiddle, because even if you work just as hard as the leader, you will never receive the same praise or financial rewards."

Ferguson had ups and downs with deputies and these bromances can turn ugly. Brian Clough and Peter Taylor were the Burton and Taylor of management double acts, regularly breaking up and making up at Derby and Nottingham Forest, but they were ahead of their time: Taylor would likely be a technical director now, not a mere assistant. When he rejoined the Rams, he courted several of Clough's Forest players. "Peter tried to sign me for Derby County, which Brian Clough didn't take too kindly to," remembers Danny Wilson, now a veteran manager himself. "That's one of the famous rifts, I suppose."



Above Busby and Murphy had a special bond **Right** "You can't come and live with us, Bruno"

Their way of working was rare, as Wilson adds that Taylor "didn't really get involved much at the training ground... the recruitment side of it was down to Peter – he was great at spotting players."

Wilson is a very good man to ask about management teams. He played, assisted and managed across four divisions, over four decades, and has more experience of diverse number twos than a zookeeper. He actively

A CERTAIN BROMANCE

These three manager-assistant relationships sadly went sour



BRIAN CLOUGH AND PETER TAYLOR

So on-again-off-again that there's even a bromantic movie, *The Damned United*, the Derby/Forest legends finally fell out for good when Taylor left and tried to sign Clough's players. Said Clough: "If I was driving along the A52 between Derby and Nottingham and saw Taylor broken down, I wouldn't pick him up. I'd run him over." He later regretted never making up.



JURGEN KLOPP AND ZELJKO BUVAC

Liverpool supporters feared the worst when Klopp's long-term assistant Buvac suddenly left mid-season, in April 2018. "I felt like I've been the manager for all those 17 years," said the man nicknamed 'The Brain', who'd been tapped up by Arsenal the season he quit. Klopp was furious, but allayed the fans' concerns by then winning everything. They're yet to make peace.



ALEX FERGUSON AND BRIAN KIDD

After seven successful years at Manchester United, Kidd became Blackburn manager without the other's blessing – Ferguson's autobiography accused Kidd of being insecure and undermining him. Kidd said Disney were buying the book's rights as a "sequel to *Fantasia*". He would eventually join Manchester City, which went pretty well. Just bury the hatchet, lads.



"IF AN ASSISTANT HAS APPLIED FOR MY JOB THEY'RE GOING TO BE THINKING THEY COULD DO A BETTER JOB THAN YOU – YOU SENSE IT"

credits several in his new book, *I Get Knocked Down*. "They go unmentioned a lot when success is coming," he tells *FFT*. "Everyone says, 'Oh, what a good manager he is', but you're only as good as those around you."

THE ENEMY WITHIN

Wilson's method at a new club is to give the current staff a go, but be aware who wanted the job. "If an assistant applied for it, they're not going to be that easy to work alongside, because they're thinking that they could do a better job than you," he explains. "If things aren't going particularly well, then you've got to look over your shoulder and see whether you're getting the 100 per cent support that you want. If you're not certain of that, then that's the time you have to say goodbye."

Assistants will fill in when the manager is elsewhere, often with training, so it's easy to spread discord. "And you can sense that," says Wilson. "Your senses flag it up straight away that it's happening."



His own coaching career began at Barnsley under old Sheffield Wednesday team-mate Viv Anderson, as player-assistant manager, which proved a bit much: "It was assistant manager-stroke-dogsbody – basically we did everything, the first team to the reserves."

Then Anderson made a simultaneous step up and down: he became Bryan Robson's assistant at top-flight Middlesbrough, which created a vacancy. Wilson steered Barnsley into the Premier League, having promoted reserve-team coach and Tykes legend Eric Winstanley as "he knew all of the younger players", several of whom broke through. He calls it "the best decision I've ever made".

Today's Premier League benches may look like Formula One pit crews, but the top three are often pretty standard: manager, assistant, first-team coach, in that order. The main thrust of a normal matchweek? Coaches take regular training, the manager ruminates on their next opponents, and the assistant provides a link between the two.

Brackley assistant Ward spent five years at Burnley with Sean Dyche and Ian Woan, who had met as youngsters at Clough's Forest. The duo even lived together during the week in a flat outside the town. "They had a really good dynamic," says Ward. "Woany would do a lot of the sessions in the week, then Dyche would come in closer to the game and we'd work on team strength; areas where we could hurt the opposition. Listen, everyone has got respect for the assistant manager, but there's a difference. When the manager steps in, it does carry a little more weight."

Coaches at every level probably want to give managing a go, continues Ward. Michael Beale's recent relocation to Rangers caused consternation after just half a season in the QPR hot seat, but you can see his motivation, having previously been third fiddle in Glasgow under Steven Gerrard and assistant Gary McAllister. Perhaps tellingly, they were sacked by Aston Villa a few months after Beale left them in the Midlands. "It would take me 15 to 20 years to become as good as Michael as an on-pitch coach, delivering sessions," said Gerrard. "So I let Mick be Mick, because he's the expert."

Those roles can vary. Jennifer Foster cut her coaching teeth in the USA, Dubai and as Birmingham City Women's first-team coach, and is now the assistant head coach under Lauren Smith at Bristol City, flying high in the Women's Championship. Their setup may look a bit lopsided in terms of status, as the first-team coach is legendary Lioness Anita Asante, but Foster disagrees. "Anita's got great knowledge, but then it's about utilising me and Lauren to help her transition that on to the pitch in a coaching way," she says. ▸

Meanwhile, Foster helps out with tactics, recruitment and other stuff that old-school number twos would struggle with. She has given a presentation to the entire Bristol City coaching staff, for example, both men's and women's, youth to seniors. There's a fair bit of idea-exchanging across the club, she says, her first workplace "where that's actually happened". The role has definitely evolved – but some gaffers remain control-freaky.

"I've been in environments where the manager wants to take sole control," admits Foster, "and a lot of that's because they don't trust the people working underneath them." Good partnerships tend to differ in tone, too. "I'm probably more vocal on the touchline," she adds, "whereas Lauren's very good at being calm." Is that expected of assistants, the matchday shouting? "Well, I might just have a louder voice!"

Good cop, bad cop still works, but "usually it's the first-team coach that's the nutter", says Roger Johnson, who looks impressively intense while Ward chats away. Or he might simply be prepping a session. They're busy.

"THE GAME'S EVOLVED"

Things were way more raucous in Johnson's younger days, when two Wimbledon alumni managed him at Wycombe. "Lawrie Sanchez was part of the Crazy Gang, but he was the quietest bloke ever," he recalls. "Terry Gibson was the one making us all laugh. I was a kid, so thought it was just the done thing. He'd get out of his car dressed up as Elvis Presley. Once a month, he'd arrive in fancy dress; he would have driven in this outfit, only to make us laugh. It's probably a dying breed now."

He definitely doesn't encourage it. "That'd probably give me the hump," says Johnson. "We come in on Monday and the assistant manager's in fancy dress? I'd think, 'Hang about, we lost on Saturday and we're pissing around'. The game's evolved a bit."

Managers do need a mood-lightener, he concedes, but that can go too far – what do you do if you end up coaching England, a real menagerie of football minds? The other Peter Taylor (Leicester, Brighton and about 20 other clubs) was renowned for training-ground larks, although you do wonder what Becks, Scholesy & Co made of his famous Norman Wisdom impression as Three Lions caretaker. More contentious was Steve Harrison, brought in by Graham Taylor after being sacked by Millwall for a grim 'lavatorial' stunt involving a high wardrobe, a low cup, strong bowel control and good aim. Lovely.

What makes managers choose particular assistants? A complementary personality helps: pick someone who knows how you tick. Kevin Keegan and Terry McDermott were such good pals, they even scheduled vasectomies on the same day. They paired up for Newcastle's rebirth in 1992 but their success happened only after McDermott convinced Keegan to stay, following a classic KK flounce just months into the job. Foster says a yin-yang is vital in key games.

> "SOME ASSISTANTS FEEL THAT THEY NEED TO MIRROR THE MANAGER, WHEREAS GOOD COACHES WILL KNOW THEY DON'T NEED ANOTHER CLONE BUT A CHALLENGE"

Below Kidd led training drills at United for Fergie **Right** "Kev, let's go and get the snip together..."



"You've got to understand how each other works; what each other needs during those moments," she explains. "Somebody might need that calmness, or a little message just to bring things back to reality."

Then again, new assistants are sometimes thrust upon a struggling manager. Brendan Rodgers and Ralph Hasenhuttl were both restaffed in their final summers at Liverpool and Southampton, then sacked months later anyway. Liverpool's shake-up did at least lead to Pep Lijnders' first big promotion.

Anfield's 'Boot Room' was always the gold standard for coaching staff, with its tea-and-tactics and promote-from-within culture, and the production line is still fertile: Beale is a Liverpool academy alumnus, for one, as is Forest's current supremo, Steve Cooper. At Manchester United, meanwhile, Ferguson remained relevant by actively altering his attitude to assistants. He had arrived at Old Trafford with Archie Knox ("two bad cops," joked Archie) then in 1991 he promoted Brian Kidd, arguably the most underrated figure in Premier League history. No kidding.

Kiddo did have one iconic moment: going full *Platoon* on the pitch after Steve Bruce's crucial April 1993 winner against Sheffield Wednesday at the Stretford End. It would become the first of several league titles Kidd helped United to win. Eventually, he fell out with Ferguson, became Blackburn manager, was relegated, sacked, returned to coaching and spent over a decade at Manchester City. Honestly, count those medals.





In later years, Fergie looked further afield for new ideas, first to a potential successor in Carlos Queiroz – "he spoiled his chances by leaving United twice," huffed the Scot – then Dutch supercoach Rene Meulensteen, hired after a memorable interview. Rather than ramble on, he asked to demonstrate, and ran a technical session with some younger players. "That clinched it," enthused Fergie.

Meulensteen became United's first-team coach, allowing Ferguson's faithful ex-player, Mike Phelan, to assist. Phelan went on to briefly manage Hull before returning to Old Trafford to support Ole Gunnar Solskjaer. Meulensteen and Queiroz also branched out, with varying success. In fact, they've just had interesting World Cups in Qatar: Meulensteen was the secret weapon as Australia reached the last 16, while Iran gaffer Queiroz picked a very justifiable fight with Jurgen Klinsmann.

Between Kidd and Queiroz, Fergie turned to a man who would set a new standard for bizarre, switchback coaching careers. This summer, Steve McClaren replaced Phelan at Old Trafford as deputy to Erik ten Hag, his former assistant at Twente, which must feel slightly weird. But then the mighty Tord Grip did the same, initially managing Eriksson at Degerfors before aiding him at Lazio, England and beyond. A very steady Grip.

McClaren's career path is more reminiscent of a Scalextric track. After Manchester United he managed Middlesbrough half-decently, while also fulfilling a role as part of England's backroom staff. He inherited the top job from Eriksson after the 2006 World Cup when Luiz Felipe Scolari baulked, and made an intriguing choice as his own number two: high-profile veteran Terry Venables. El Tel had previously worked in a similar position with McClaren's Boro predecessor, Bryan Robson. Chairman Steve Gibson couldn't bring himself to sack his childhood hero, so hired Venables as head coach, leaving Robbo haunting the training ground like a tracksuited lost soul.

"YES, BOSS"

Venables' own stint as England manager began after another disastrous duo: Graham Taylor and Lawrie McMenemy. It's a bad sign, needing someone to take the heat off before you've even started. At least big Lawrie was savvy enough to keep his head down in the infamous documentary, *The Impossible Job*. Not so, Taylor's other hapless assistant, Phil 'Yes, Boss' Neal, who seemed pathetically loyal. It can be hard to get the balance right.

"That's a bit of a grey area," says Bristol City Women's Foster. "Some assistants feel they need to be that mirror of the manager, whereas good managers will think, 'I don't need another clone – [I need] somebody who buys into what I'm trying to do but will also challenge me'."

Stephen Ward agrees. At Euro 2016 he played under unlikely assistant Roy Keane, who'd bonded with manager Martin O'Neill as a TV pundit. How did that work?

"Really well," says Ward. "Actually, Roy was really calm in situations. Straight away, he's got that presence. When they had an opinion, you listened to it; ultimately, the two of them are just winners, they want to win games of football, and that was embedded into us as ▶



"ONCE YOU'VE TASTED THE MANAGERIAL SIDE OF THINGS, GETTING TO MAKE DECISIONS FOR YOURSELF, IT'S VERY DIFFICULT TO GO BACK TO WORKING FOR SOMEONE ELSE"

a squad. And obviously we had a successful European Championship."

Meanwhile, England's own Roy – Hodgson – shared a boat trip down the Seine with Ray Lewington rather than watch the Three Lions' second-round opponents, Iceland. You can't imagine Gareth Southgate dragging Steve Holland away from the analysis room to do that. And spare a thought for poor Sammy Lee: just one appearance as England assistant, in Slovakia, before Sam Allardyce's pint-of-wine debacle. Unbowed, Lee then joined Big Sam at three more clubs in need of rescuing; football's own emergency service.

But long-term relationships do fade. After 17 years, Rui Faria finally left Jose Mourinho's side in May 2018, before Manchester United succumbed to the Special One's traditional downturn. He cited family pressures, which makes sense – Ward and Johnson's schedule sounds full-on, and they're part-time. "Being Jose's assistant for so long," explained Faria, "I couldn't be assistant to somebody else."

Faria's first management post, in Qatar in 2019, proved short-lived, so it'll be interesting to see where he lands next. "Once you've tasted the management side of it, getting to make decisions yourself," reflects former Barnsley boss Wilson, "it's very difficult to go back to working for someone else."

Wilson worked with two top coaches who did, though: Chris Hutchings twice replaced old boss Paul Jewell in the Premier League, at Bradford and then Wigan, before assisting Wilson's Barnsley comeback in December 2013. As a player, Wilson won a League Cup at Luton under the late Ray Harford, who was eventually sacked for, essentially, a lack of charisma. Harford would later become Blackburn's number two, won the Premier League in 1995, then took over when Kenny Dalglish moved upstairs. "Ray was a great coach, but didn't like having confrontations," continues Wilson. "He would really prefer to be stood on the training ground rather than sat in a suit."

Above Taylor was flanked by 'yes men' Neal and McMenemy

The game is so rich and huge nowadays, stepping back as an assistant is no shame. There are former managers all over Premier League touchlines: McClaren (Manchester United), Albert Stuivenberg (Arsenal), Paul Clement (Everton), Jason Tindall (Newcastle) and Lijnders (Liverpool), who briefly led Dutch club NEC before returning to the Reds after assistant Zeljko Buvac's 2018 exit.

It's a challenging balancing act, loyalty and ambition. Do their own managerial targets come up in the job interview?

"God, I can't remember!" chuckles Foster – although that question did arise at another presentation, with boss Smith in attendance. "I was honest, and she knows that. But right now, it's important for me to be in this role and get some experience."

And what happens if they're offered the gaffer's job? "I'm not sure if me and Wardy have had this conversation yet!" says Roger Johnson, as our three-way chat winds down. "So I'll do it now. If I got the sack tomorrow, I'd say to Wardy, 'Take the team. I'm going to get another job, and as soon as I do, you're coming with me'. I'm not going to make him leave just because I've got the sack. That's down to him."

They're the hard choices for loyal assistants. Do you take the managerial plunge, or accept that life as a number two is as high as you'll ascend? You know what they say: once a Tord, always a Tord.

ASSISTANT PEP TALKS

Liverpool assistant manager Pep Lijnders is the epitome of a modern number two. The Dutchman has an agent, a book out and the ambition to manage himself. But when it comes to assisting, it's Klopp and Klopp only, he tells *FFT*...

Interview Arthur Renard

What made you join Liverpool in 2014?
I had been at the academy of Porto since 2007 and had started to think about a next step. [In 2013] I received an approach from Manchester United – Alex Ferguson and his Dutch assistant Rene Meulensteen wanted to bring me to the club. It looked really good, but a few months later Ferguson retired and the opportunity fell through. One year later, Liverpool showed an interest and I became their under-16s coach. After a while I began to speak with Brendan Rodgers, who was curious how I was implementing a 3-4-3 system in my team. We got on well and in my second season [2015-16] I was asked to be one of his assistants. I learned a lot from him, although he left by the October. I kept my assistant role when Jurgen Klopp came in and we've developed a very strong bond.

Below Lijnders has become Klopp's most trusted ally

Can you explain your position as assistant manager at Liverpool?
I try to make the life of the manager at the club a little more comfortable. Basically I'm responsible for the training process. With the staff we decide what we want to develop for the team, then together with Jurgen I guide that process on the pitch. We train 'our way of play' each day. We want to improve the tempo, intentions, relationships and timings between players. It's about having control by being dominant, in each game, in each phase of a season. We try to dictate what goes on.

How has the role of the assistant manager, in general, changed in recent years?
Football is always evolving, and every club is searching to fine tune their atmosphere. The role of the assistant manager is defined by the manager, so for each manager this role is different and will evolve the longer they work together. The amount of backroom staff is rising, and the pressure is on them as well due to the intensity of the Premier League. It has never been so competitive. Managing all the staff and creating a culture in the club to perform every three days takes so much time and thought from the gaffer. Let me say it like this: the players are running a full marathon every week, but the manager runs a marathon in his head every day. They say it's one of the loneliest places in football, because of 'scoreboard journalism' as we say in the Netherlands [judging teams on results over playing style]. The fact somebody close can help with this is crucial to navigating the jungle of the Premier League. Loyalty and trust ensure that this relationship develops.

How would you describe the relationship between the manager, the staff and the players at Liverpool?
It's like a family, a relationship full of trust and commitment to each other. I think it's clear that before players go to the manager, they will have already spoken to me several times. However, Jurgen loves the talk and the clearness, to help drive the performance and the development of each individual. He genuinely thrives on this, helping people to blossom. He throws confidence at you! Fans feel this – that staff and players are one at Liverpool. It's the Holy Trinity: supporters, club management and players having this common plan and this common ambition.

Do you speak with other assistants at other clubs? Which do you hold in high regard?
Good question. I have more relationships with managers than with assistants. I was close with Michael Beale [former Liverpool academy coach, now Rangers manager], of course, and I was on the UEFA Pro Licence programme with Mikel Arteta when he was at Manchester City. In general I have good contacts with managers all over the world.

Do you get recognised in the streets and asked for autographs and selfies?
Quite a lot, yeah. It's a privilege to work at Liverpool for almost a decade – it's created stability and brought us so much success. As long as we stay this ambitious, hopefully this continues – the football world goes so quick, but the cups we've won and the memories between fans and team stay with us forever. I will never take one moment with fans for granted. It's a special club, a club with real values – representing this means loads of pressure, but it also brings you so much joy.

What about your own future? Do you see yourself as a boss, like your spell at NEC?
I will assist Jurgen and Jurgen only. After this project I will be my own manager. When our contract finishes, I will sit down with my agent and see what's available. For now, my focus is on attacking each game in front of us.

Pep Lijnders' book, 'Intensity: Inside Liverpool FC', published by Reach Sport, is available now

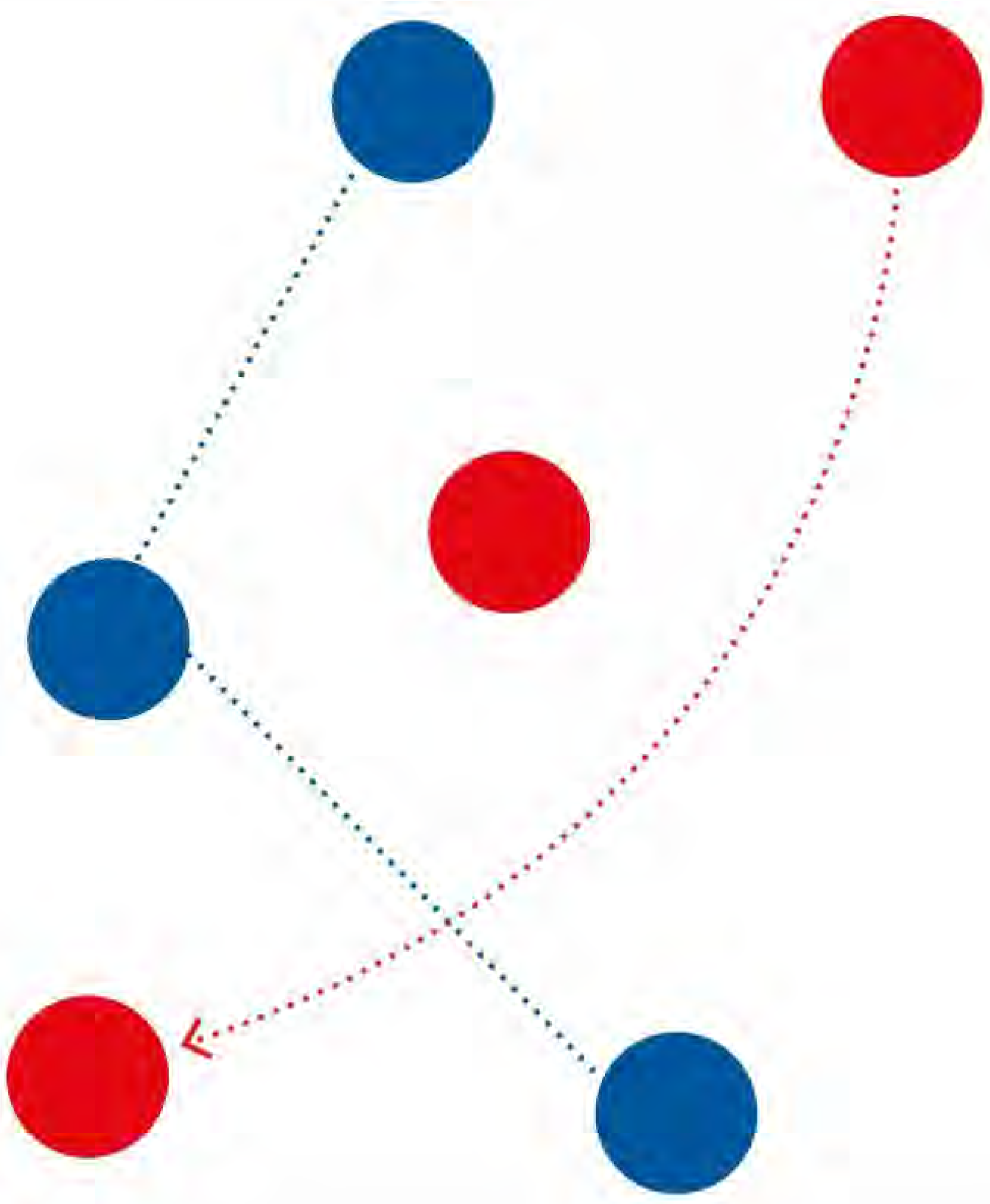


"ME AND JURGEN HAVE A VERY STRONG BOND. HE THROWS CONFIDENCE AT YOU – FANS FEEL IT"

GARY NEVILLE'S BLUEPRINT TO SAVE FOOTBALL

The former Manchester United defender has been campaigning to improve the national game for quite some time – now, talking exclusively to *FFT*, he outlines his seven-point plan. The first priority? No more herding cats...

Words Andy Mitten



Gary Neville is a man on a mission. We see him on Sky Sports, see his *Overlap* videos, hear his podcasts, read about his business dealings. We can stay in one of the hotels he part owns, eat and drink in Cafe Football. We can watch his Salford City team play football in League Two. We can even watch a skyscraper he's behind going up amid Manchester's myriad other towers, or study at his University Academy 92 near Old Trafford cricket ground.

This man of the red left has firm political convictions and expresses them in his latest book called *The People's Game*, with the journalist Rob Draper.

It's his view from a front seat in football – 300 cogent and truly impassioned pages with chapter titles such as 'Power to the People'. 'This is How it Feels to Be City', 'The Fairer Sex?', 'The Forlorn Fourteen', 'Fit and Proper' and 'Vanity Project'.

It starts on April 18, 2021, when Neville heard the news of the proposed European Super League. Anyone watching Sky Sports at the time would have seen his reaction, his opposition and vehemence to it. "The final straw," declares Neville. "Some people might think that my interest in the governance of football, and the anger I felt, began that day. But the reality is that it was just a catalyst." The European Super League was dead within days – at least for now.

In an exclusive interview with *FFT*, Neville defines the seven areas where he wants to see change in football. He's been a match-going Manchester United fan, a player for the club from schoolboy level right the way through to first-team captain, an England international, an England coach, a manager at Valencia and an owner at Salford. He knows the media, and his family were deeply involved at Bury FC. His siblings were also heavily involved in top level women's sport – sister Tracey played for and coached the England netball team, brother Phil managed the Lionesses. Few are better placed to understand all the issues involved in football.

This is Neville's plan to save it... ▶



"FOOTBALL CAN CREATE CHANGE. CO-ORDINATE WHAT WE DO, AND WE'D ALL BE BETTER FOR IT"



1 INDEPENDENT REGULATION

In April, the government announced initial plans for a new independent regulator for football, following a review chaired by former sports minister Tracey Crouch. Neville has long since publicly lobbied for such a move.

"The need for an independent regulator hasn't just come from me," he explains to *FFT*. "It's supported by the EFL, the National League, fan groups and most importantly by a fan-led review chaired by Tracey Crouch. The conclusion I come to is that English football is too important to towns and cities across the whole country. Football clubs are protected heritage assets and we can't allow the governance of those clubs to be heavily influenced by American investment funds and nation states.

"We've seen what they've tried to do with Project Big Picture and the European Super League. They are attempting to alter the rule of football to the detriment of the English pyramid, and we need to make sure we protect our game. It's like in 2007 when the banking industry was a great danger to everybody – they were regulated, which meant they couldn't lend 110 per cent mortgages any more. Football needs some simple rules that mean the quality and integrity of the Premier League is always maintained, but we have boundaries set that mean the top six and other potential owners who have aspirations to take the game further away from its roots are brought into line. There are other issues including fairer distribution and working as a collective, too.

"The biggest problem with the FA is that they have no power because they don't control the funding. It's an organisation that's prehistoric in its makeup. It's not modern at all, and while it is representative of all the different football councils across the country, the FA struggles to get things done because the Premier League has the power. The FA is sat there with a begging bowl below the Premier League asking for help. The Premier League applies soft power to them all the time, and lands them with crap like the disciplinary stuff.

"A lot of very good people work at the FA, I've been exposed to them, and the work they have done with Team England, the Lionesses and St George's Park is really impressive. But in terms of governance they're a non-entity, because they don't govern football, the Premier League do."

2 A FAIRER MODEL FOR DISTRIBUTION

When the Class of 92 took over Salford City in 2014, the eighth-tier club averaged crowds of around 140. Aided by Singaporean businessman Peter Lim, Neville has since helped them climb four divisions to League Two. It's given him a greater appreciation of life in the lower leagues, and he believes money should be distributed in a fairer way.

EFL chairman Rick Parry has proposed banishing parachute payments – Neville feels



that could be part of the solution. "We've created cliff edges," says the ex-Manchester United defender. "From Champions League clubs to those just below, then to the bottom 12-14 Premier League clubs. Then there's another jump to the Championship, another between the Championship and League One, then from League Two to the National League. I've seen that close at hand, and they all need smoothing out.

"Rick Parry, to be fair to him, came out with a great line: 'You don't need a parachute unless there's a massive drop'. There should be a gradual gradient that means there's economic and sporting disappointment if you go down, but it shouldn't be catastrophic or create desperation, greed and self-interest all through the game, which is what happens.

"I'm asking for a fairer distribution. That wouldn't be to the detriment of the Premier League – it can still compete for the best players and trophies. We're already spending billions more than Spain or Italy, irrespective of the £150m going down to the EFL. We won't leave the Premier League short by taking another couple of hundred million out, putting it into the system and removing parachutes."



"THE FINAL STRAW WAS THE WILLINGNESS TO DESTROY OUR FOOTBALL WITH THE SUPER LEAGUE"

3 A NEW LICENSING SYSTEM FOR OWNERS

Neville said little negative about the Glazers when he played for Manchester United, but he's now an outspoken critic of the American family who took control in 2005, via a controversial leveraged takeover. But it's not just the Glazers who he has in his sights. His hometown club Bury were kicked out of the Football League in 2019 after spiralling into trouble under Stewart Day, then the unpopular Steve Dale. Earlier this year, Roman Abramovich sold Chelsea after he was sanctioned by the UK government, relating to his alleged links to Vladimir Putin.

"Because of what has happened with Abramovich and Putin, it has alerted us all," says Neville. "We need to sort out the fit-and-proper-person test. On one level you have Abramovich and Putin, on another Steve Dale and Stewart Day at Bury. This isn't just about attacking nation states or American investment funds, which could be a big problem. We also have rogue owners at the bottom of the scale. We need a transparent and robust licence system.

"None of us know the answer as to why Saudi Arabia were accepted into Newcastle. Some think it was because of government pressure and arms deals, while others suggest it's because Abu Dhabi are already in [at Manchester City]. We don't know. How can we not know how one of our greatest football clubs, an institution like Newcastle United, was allowed to be taken over like that? I'm not saying it should not be allowed to happen, I'm saying we should know why it was allowed to happen.

"There should be clear criteria where everybody knows what you need to be a fit and proper owner of an English football club. It's not just a business on the street like Harrods, John Lewis or Uber where they invest Middle Eastern funds; football clubs should be treated differently, because they are too important to communities. If you own a football club, there should be a high level of expectation for those owners.

"I actually think American investment funds are a greater risk to English football than nation states. Nation states bring their own issues like workers' rights, human rights and LGBT rights, but I don't think they have the intention of damaging football in this country. American investment funds want to change the fabric. They want to create franchise football, to change the rules of the game, extract profits and dividends. They could drive prices up with regard to tickets.

"What happened at Bury is a big problem. I watched my mum and dad try to hold a great community club like Bury together for years. My hometown club disappeared in 2019, devastating the community I grew up in. The death of Bury seemed to be a wake-up call. It prompted the government to make their manifesto commitment for a fan-led review of football.

"What happened at Chelsea is a big problem. Abramovich was the first foreign owner of a major Premier League club. In 2003, we thought the game was big, but it was a parochial affair in terms of ownership. 'Big-money owners' meant someone like Jack Walker at Blackburn, who was worth £600m. Arsenal's vice chairman David Dein summed it up well when he said: 'Roman Abramovich has parked his tanks on our lawn and is firing £50 notes at us.'

"What's happening at Manchester United is a big problem. Abramovich and Malcolm Glazer changed the cosiness of the domestic game. From opposite sides of the old Cold War, they'd seen the value in our game, even if they had very different motives. Despite the fans having been against the Glazers for 10 years previously, it was only in around 2014 that it really sank in just how bad the situation was. Even so, I never called for their heads. The final straw was when they seemed willing to destroy English football with the Super League.

"What's happening at Newcastle could be a big problem in the future that we don't know about. My point is, we don't know how you become accepted into English football as an owner. To me, football clubs should be treated like public bodies. In the time that you own it, you should be a guardian of that club for its fans. You should be independent and transparent. You should have to meet with and speak to fans. You should be open with them, and allow investment from them. All of these things need to happen - the only way we will get there is through regulation."

4 MAKE FOOTBALL SUSTAINABLE

Bury's demise gained the most attention, but they're far from the only club who have suffered cash woes in recent years. Often, the cause is simply spending more than the club can actually afford, in a bid to get ahead on the pitch. The EFL imposes financial rules on clubs in an attempt to prevent those problems occurring, but they're not uniform – regulations in League One and League Two ▸



differ significantly from those further up in the Championship, for example.

"There are only two ways in which to create true sustainability in football," says Neville. "One is that you're only allowed to spend the money generated from honest revenue. The other way is that clubs spend more than the revenue they generate, and that is then subsidised by owner funding. My view would be that we need to ensure that when clubs spend more than their revenue, secure funding is in place to meet those obligations.

"Andy Holt from Accrington Stanley, who I spoke to for the book, strongly believes that clubs should only be able to spend the money they generate naturally and there should be a fairer distribution model from the top. My view is that if you do that, you're preventing a Jack Walker at Blackburn, a Leicester, a Chelsea or Manchester City emerging to challenge the elite. Or a Salford City. You're stopping the dream of getting to the top.

"We should allow investment into football clubs above and beyond the revenues that

"THE EUROS SHOULD BE A PUNCH IN THE FACE FOR WHAT WOMEN'S FOOTBALL CAN BRING TO OUR GAME"

are generated, but owners should have to secure that through bank guarantees, cash on the table or personal guarantees to ensure we don't get a Bury situation, chasing a dream without the money to back it up.

"The current rules need tidying up. There are different rules for each division, they're not aligned, which demonstrates the lack of the collective in English football. There's this phrase, 'the football family', but it's no family. Each club operates itself and the league's executives are trying to herd cats. One might come in or sign up, another will escape. There is no collective approach. We need to work



as one to create a better English football, while maintaining a great Premier League."

5 A FANS' CHARTER

In Germany's Bundesliga, regulations ensure that all clubs must give the majority

of voting rights to their supporters, via the 50+1 rule. Neville understands that such a regulation is unrealistic in England, but feels fans should be given greater influence in decision-making.

"I'm not a 50+1 man, though I know many are," he says. "English football has always had wealthy owners. More than 100 years ago, John Henry Davies saved Manchester United. We're too far gone to get back to 51-49, but I think we could get to a point in the future where fans have a meaningful stake in a football club. That might be 25, 15 or 10 per cent. Fans have a seat on the board and there are strict rules from the regulator around what owners can and can't do.

"That might mean a club can't move out of a city. Or change the colours of the kit, which I did at Salford City. I look back now and think to myself, 'Was that the right thing to do?' We came into a level eight club, but should I have been allowed to do that as an owner of a football club?

"Fans are passionate about issues such as affordability, ticket allocations and prices. Fans are never going away; they're always going to be there as the most important component of the game. Fans can have great power if they come together collectively. Owners should serve the club and attempt to create a successful team, but also work closely with supporters and get to a point where they almost become the joint owners, even though they're not."

6 LEVELLING UP THE WOMEN'S GAME

The Lionesses captured the nation's hearts by winning Euro 2022, but the women's game has always had to battle for better treatment. Manchester United didn't even have a proper women's team until 2018. Neville has been around women's sport all his life, and wants to see true equality.

"It's not just women's football," he says. "My sister has long been involved in netball – they've had to fight for funding and get put under great pressure to be in the top three in the world, or they lose funding. Women should not have to fight for funding and equal status in this country.

"The FA even stopped women's football – it was attracting massive crowds in the 1920s. My mum was stopped from playing football in the boys' team in the 1960s and 1970s. This was a period where sexism, misogyny, racism and other major societal issues were glossed over and swept under the carpet.

"I have two girls who play netball – I watch them relentlessly. I've been surrounded by women's sport all my life – netball, hockey, rounders, women's football. My family has embraced it. My brother was the England manager for three years, and my second sport is now netball. It used to be cricket.

"Only now are we getting to a point where women's football is being screened live on television. The Euros should be a punch in the face for what it can bring to our game and our country. There needs to be a root-and-branch review of women's football, setting it up for the future, not continuing the lack of investment from the past.

"The women's game should be elite in England and the team currently is elite, but women's football should be amplified and supported by the men's game. It should be given equal standing and status."



7 FOOTBALL AND SOCIETY UNITED

Sadly, racist incidents have become more prevalent in football over recent years, and in society as a whole. Every occurrence is different, but sometimes – like Edinson Cavani's three-match ban for using the word '*negrito*' on social media in December 2020, when the Uruguayan insisted he had no racist intent – Neville believes there's a need for better education.

"Racism has since become a competition between the different football organisations as to who can come up with the best slogan," laments Neville. "The reality is that we need action, education, stronger consequences, rehabilitation and reintroduction. We need a proper system to ensure that everybody works together as one.

"Everybody wants to deal with racism and inequalities in football, and to do it well. But even on that, the differing leagues and organisations can't come together and work as one. I find that crazy.

"Why can't the Premier League, the EFL, the League Managers' Association and the PFA work with a body like Kick It Out, who have been around a long time, and co-ordinate their efforts into one programme, one slogan, one campaign? Then think about how we measure any success.

"Football can create huge change. All we need to do is come together and co-ordinate what we do, and we'd be far better for it. We have one campaign that says, 'No room for racism', one that says, 'Show racism the red card', another that says 'Kick it out' and yet another that says 'Fairer game for all'. All of those are great, but wouldn't it be even greater if we came together and brought the funding into one pot?

"Whenever there's another racism offence, people say we need more education, so why can't every stakeholder have that education? How can it be that Edinson Cavani comes over without an induction into English football, and what certain words and phrases mean [in English]? We should educate our players, our media, our supporters and our pundits. There's none of that at the moment, but the game has enough money to do it."

THE FUTURE

At the time of writing, no timeline had been announced by the government for the introduction of the first point in Neville's action plan, an independent regulator. He's clear, though, about how he would like the landscape to look by 2032.

"If you could show me a better football 10 years from now, it would be that a regulator has been introduced, and the majority of the recommendations have been implemented," he concludes. "The FA has been modernised and restructured, there's a fairer distribution model, we have sustainability in play, and we have an equality and diversity programme that's revered around the world.

"We should have a far more equal women's game, and a fit-and-proper-owners test where everybody knows what the rules are. Then we move the regulation of football back into the hands of an empowered, restricted and modern FA. For me, that would represent absolute perfection."

It won't be easy, and there have even been reports that new prime minister Liz Truss might scrap the independent regulator idea, but Neville's determination to effect change is beyond doubt. He's a man on a mission, with a track record of getting things done. No matter the resistance, expect him to carry on campaigning for some time yet.

Gary's book, 'The People's Game', is out now



Beth Mead hated herself. She despised the thoughts that had crossed her mind, but felt powerless to stop them.

England's would-be Euro 2022 hero had been left out of Great Britain's squad for the delayed Tokyo 2020 Olympics and it had sent her into a spiral like nothing she had experienced before.

Stuck at home as Team GB travelled to Japan to take part in 2021's rearranged Games, Mead found herself locked in a paradox. She wanted the side to do well in the tournament but, at the same time, she hoped they would fall short in their quest for a medal, so that manager Hege Riise would regret overlooking her.

"I found it very hard, because I hated the thoughts I was having while the Olympics were being played," the 27-year-old tells *FourFourTwo* now. "I wanted the girls to do well, but I also didn't, because of Hege.

"I found myself thinking thoughts I never thought I would. But I feel most players in that position would think exactly the same; it's just whether they admit it or not. ▸

WOULD LAST SEASON HAVE HAPPENED IF I HAD GONE TO THE OLYMPICS? SOME THINGS HAPPEN FOR A REASON

Twelve months after being overlooked in Tokyo for being "too aggressive", Beth Mead led England to glory at Euro 2022 as the tournament's best player. As she tells *FFT*, you really should like her when she's angry...

Words Chris Evans

"Reflecting on it now, how I felt was quite normal under the circumstances. There was no malice towards anyone else who was part of that team. But it was tough."

In truth, it wasn't a big surprise that Mead hadn't been selected. Riise had overlooked the forward for a couple of previous England squads while the Norwegian doubled up as Lionesses interim and Great Britain manager before Sarina Wiegman's impending arrival in September 2021 – not that it made the rejection any easier for Mead.

To escape those dark feelings, the Arsenal forward took her mind off what was going on in Japan, taking only a passing interest in the Olympics and busying herself with trips to watch the men's European Championship and Wimbledon tennis tournament. But even as Team GB lost 4-3 in extra time to Australia in an epic quarter-final tussle, she bristled with frustration at the thought of how she could have made a difference.

As the new 2021-22 season began, Mead had a choice. Instead of letting anger and injustice consume her, she channelled both as motivation to prove her doubters wrong.

A little over a year later, she was the toast of the nation. Mead smashed six goals and assisted five en route to winning the Golden Boot and Player of the Tournament awards as England lifted the European Championship trophy, the country's first major title – men's or women's – since 1966 and all that. She obliterated Jimmy Greaves' 13-goal single-season scoring record for England, set back in 1960-61, by plundering a scarcely credible 20 in 2021-22, including four hat-tricks. To top off her annus mirabilis, she came second in the 2022 Ballon d'Or Feminin and UEFA Women's Player of the Year rankings behind Barcelona's Alexia Putellas, before winning the BBC Women's Footballer of the Year prize.

Point proved, then. Now Mead can reveal not just the why, but the how.

FOOTBALL AS A FIRST LOVE

Beth Mead is no stranger to blocking out the naysayers. Growing up in Whitby, North Yorkshire, the football-mad adolescent was used from a young age to being the subject of ridicule. Her crime? Being a girl in a junior league almost exclusively made up of boys.

Every weekend as she fastened her boots, the small girl with long blonde hair naturally stood out. Mead more than held her own on the pitch, but that didn't stop a deluge of disparaging comments and jokes being made within her earshot – and her dad's.

"As a kid, you think less and you don't worry about all of the outside noise," she tells *FFT*. "When I heard boys or parents laughing on the side of the pitch as I came on, I knew that I had the full belief of my team-mates, their parents and my parents.

"My dad told me that some people will always have opinions, and that I would hear a few things, but he said, 'You don't need to say anything, Beth, and neither do I – your football will do the talking'. After most games, I'd earned a lot of respect from teams and from parents for getting stuck in and playing well. Just because I was a girl running around with a ponytail didn't make me any different to those boys."

If having thick skin is a prerequisite for Mead, then so is her passion for the sport. It would have been easy for the childhood Manchester United fan to stick to watching football and instead pursue one of several other sports she tried as a youngster. Yet, while ballet classes, cross-country running, netball and hockey may have offered her the opportunity to consider other activities, they didn't really compare.

"I tried a lot of sports and enjoyed being active and joining in different things, though football always hit me different," says Mead. "I loved what I was doing on the pitch and had no other worry in the world – nothing else mattered except me kicking that football.

"That's still my way of switching off now: just running around on a football pitch and loving what I'm doing. That's never changed, from the six-year-old kid to the 27-year-old who's running around now.

"Football is my first love; my one true love. It still breaks my heart sometimes, but that's part and parcel of the game."

Top to bottom The PFA Young Women's Player of the Year; BBC Women's Footballer of the Year; Euro 2022 best player, top goalscorer and champion... this girl can, all right







The fruit of Mead's love was goals. After joining up with local team California Girls, the 10-year-old hotshot couldn't stop finding the back of the net. It wasn't too long before she had caught the eye of Middlesbrough's Centre of Excellence, where the scoring continued.

It required a 45-minute drive along country roads to reach Boro's academy from home, but accompanied by her dad's cassettes playing Madness, Queen and The Clash, the journeys would fly by. It was a good job, too, because as Mead turned 16, those trips were only going to get longer, due to Sunderland showing an interest in recruiting the young striker to their programme.

The Black Cats had a strong reputation for developing young female players in the region, but an initially reticent Mead needed some convincing from her parents to move out of her comfort zone. She would be leaving age-group football in order to play in the senior team – a teenager finding her way among adults.

"I was very lucky that I had my mum and dad, who always pushed me past my limits to the point they made me better," explains Mead. "If I had made those decisions, I may have held myself back.

"I went up to Sunderland and then started to play with women as a 16-year-old, but they were great with me and made me feel so welcome. I remember one game when I got absolutely clattered: they all ran round and protected me as if I was their kid sister, which was instantly a comfort."

The goals kept flowing. Mead finished her first campaign at Sunderland with 29 in all competitions as she clinched the second-tier Women's Premier League National Division



Golden Boot, before raising the bar higher still the next year with 30 goals in 28 games.

Mead's exploits were getting noticed, and not just in the women's game. When another prolific goalscorer moved to the Stadium of Light in 2015, he was keen to find out more about the teenager who was earning all of the plaudits on Wearside.

"Jermain Defoe was amazing with me," says Mead with a smile as she looks back at her meeting of minds with the ex-England hitman. "We were lucky to share breakfast and lunch in the same canteen as the men's team, which was very nice – it's something Sunderland got right from day one.

"He literally waited for me every morning. He heard about me being this great striker, so he wanted to know everything about me because he wasn't the only great striker at Sunderland at the time. We got on really well, talking about football every morning while he had a green tea.

"He had watched a few of my goals and said, 'I've never scored one like that before – what were you thinking when you did that?' I would always explain, but he understood that strikers have to be quite instinctive in things you do.

"We're quite similar characters in a sense – we're quite outgoing and extroverted. We bounced off each other. We stay in touch to this day, and he's always supported me and shared his experience to help me with what I'm doing in my career."

"I WANTED TO STOP BEING A BRAT, BECAUSE I'M NOT THE ONLY NO.9 TO EVER BE PUSHED OUT TO THE WING"

"*TOO* AGGRESSIVE IF ANYTHING, CLIVE"

For all of Defoe's guidance, though, his own links to north London might have meant he didn't approve of Mead's next big decision.

Arsenal are the most successful English club in the women's game and represented a move to the big time for Mead, who had continued to tear apart defences even after Sunderland won promotion from WSL2 into the top division for the 2015 season. Yet the striker's initial answer was no.

Rather than make the long move south, she decided to remain in the North East for another campaign, turning professional with Sunderland for their first season in the newly formed WSL1. She also completed the final year of her sports development degree at Teesside University.

"It was a gamble, to say the least," recalls Mead. "It was a tough decision – one I sat down and talked to my mum and dad about. It wasn't a case of getting out of my comfort zone at the time, because I knew the quality of players that Arsenal had. I hadn't had any exposure to WSL1, so I thought it was more important to be playing regularly in the top league, and I'd get more of an opportunity to do that at Sunderland than Arsenal."

Mead's decision was proved emphatically right. Despite suffering a car accident midway through the campaign when she swerved to avoid a deer, the 20-year-old registered 12 goals in 14 league games to top the scoring charts in her debut top-flight season. Her dozen strikes included a goal in both games ▸

Below Mead chose to stay at the club for Sunderland's WSL1 debut



against the Gunners, which kept her firmly on the radar of Arsenal's Spanish manager Pedro Martinez Losa.

So, it was no surprise when Martinez Losa got in touch with Mead again at the end of the following campaign to see if she would reconsider joining the north Londoners. This time, in January 2017, Mead's reply was yes.

The honeymoon period didn't last long, though. Within months of joining Arsenal, Mead was shifted out to the wing as Dutch goal sensation Vivianne Miedema arrived from Bayern Munich.

Despite Mead's initial dissatisfaction at having to learn a new position, Miedema's acquisition proved to be significant. The duo eventually hit it off – on and off the pitch. The pair are now dating, while the positional switch reawakened the resilience that has become the England forward's calling card.

"I wanted to stop being a brat, because I'm not the only person it happens to," says Mead, of being asked to play in a different position for the benefit of the team. "I'd been a No.9 for most of my career, and then I was pushed out to the wing because another No.9 came in. I was like, 'I've scored as many goals as her this year'. It felt a bit unfair – but it was another one of those life lessons.

"I was given my first England cap because I could play on the wing. It brought different elements to my game, and I'm effective as a winger because I understand from my own experience what a No.9 really wants. There are pros and cons to every situation. I'm very much about having a positive outlook on bad situations now, and I made good on what I felt was a bad situation. I worked extremely hard and tried to nail down the position that I still play today."

Inside 12 months, she was summoned to be part of Phil Neville's England squad for the 2019 World Cup qualifiers and came off the bench to make her debut in a 0-0 draw with Wales. The moment had been years in the making and made up for the forward's only previous call-up, in 2015, when she felt she was an afterthought in the plans of Neville's predecessor, Mark Sampson.

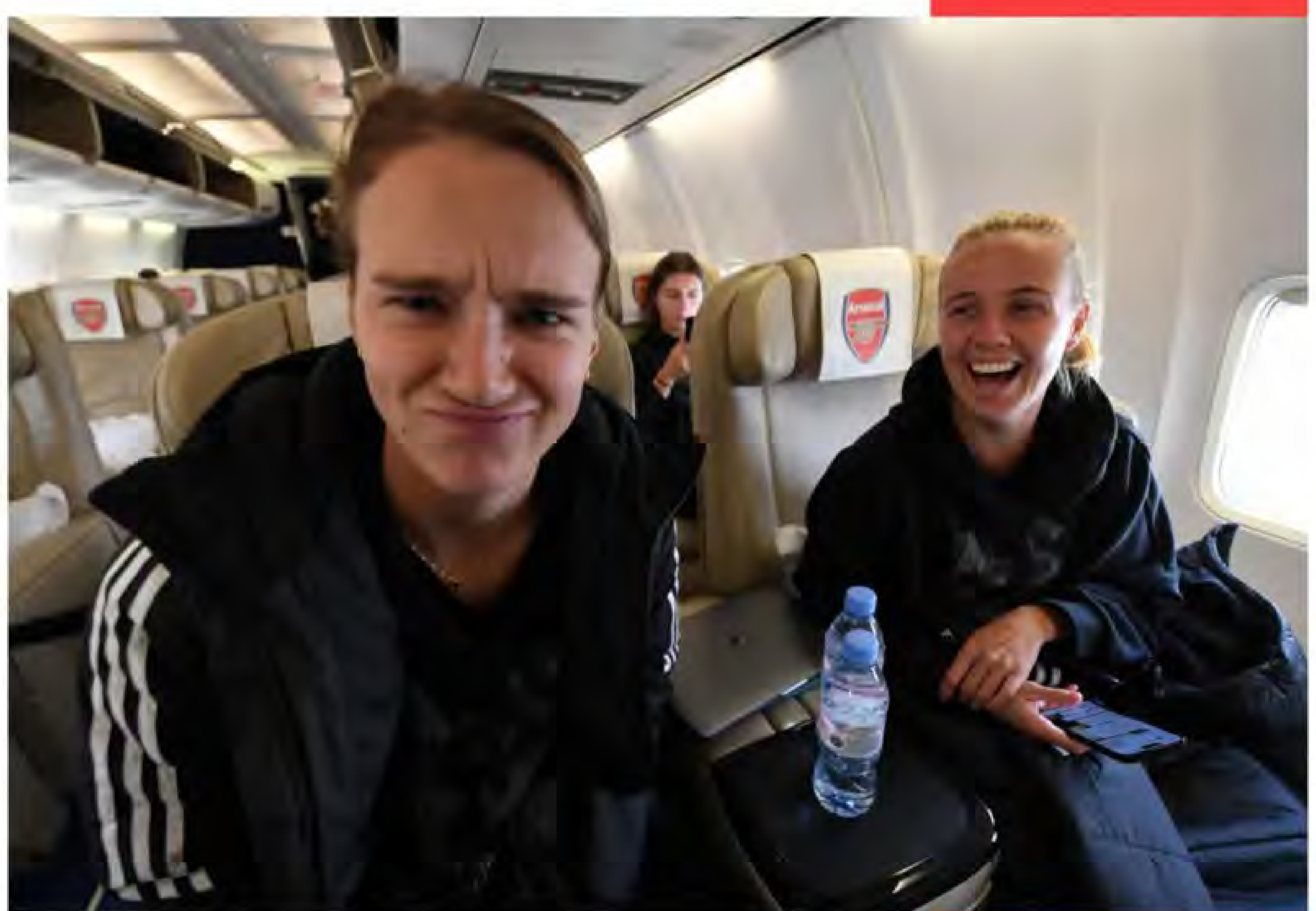
Neville saw Mead as anything but a bit-part player. The former Manchester United and Everton utility man quickly identified how to get the most out of his new star.

Part of Neville's plan for Mead to reach her potential was to harness her energy and aggression, key components of her game. Victory at the 2019 SheBelieves Cup – which included an angled match-winning strike from Mead to defeat Brazil – and a last-four spot at the World Cup suggested things were on the right path.

However, following England's agonising semi-final exit to the United States, a sharp downturn in form of seven reverses in 11 games spelled the end for Neville in January 2021 – his temporary replacement, Riise, then turned Mead's world on its head when she branded the winger as "too aggressive" and left her out of that summer's squad to compete for Olympic gold.

"That's what I struggled most with," says Mead, whose mother was diagnosed with







cancer at around the same time. "To this day, I get told that my aggression can be the best part of my game and to use it in the right manner on the pitch, so to be told that [by Riise] was the opposite.

"Phil [Neville] always told me he wanted to annoy the hell out of me before every game so that I'd run on the pitch and be an angry person; for the next manager to come in and tell me I was too aggressive... I struggled to take that. I struggled to understand it. It was a frustrating one, to say the least."

SARINA'S MAGIC

The injustice lit a fire beneath Mead.

"It wasn't the fact that I wasn't selected; it was the non-clarity and poor decisions behind that," she continues, fixing her gaze dead ahead. "But it happened, and maybe, looking at the season I just had, would that have happened if I'd gone to the Olympics? Some things happen for a reason."







Mead's numbers throughout the 2021-22 campaign would have been impossible to ignore. She had 19 goal involvements in the WSL, with 11 goals and a league-high eight assists as Arsenal finished second; they were the only English side to reach the Champions League quarter-finals. Even more impressive were her underlying stats, topping the WSL charts in several creativity metrics including key passes, big chances created and shot-creating actions per 90 minutes.

Mead was flying by the time the England squad came together for Euro 2022, having scored 14 international goals already that season before the tournament kicked off.

"As a confidence player, it helps to hear nice things sometimes," she says, smiling. "You want to be perfect as a footballer and it's never going to happen, but you can push yourself to be the best you can be. I knew I had more to give, and in the season just gone I performed more consistently rather than having good matches here and there.

Clockwise from below left Top Gunner; Mead and Miedema – name a more iconic pair; no more years of hurt; giving the Lionesses lift off in their opener; tasting victory

"WHEN CHLOE SCORED, IT WAS AS IF MY DEAD LEG WAS INSTANTLY HEALED: I JUMPED THE BARRIERS"

"I just felt great during the tournament and was loving what I was doing, which showed out on the pitch. When you get opportunities in front of goal, it doesn't always happen, but this tournament it seemed to happen and the chances kept going in the back of the net – I'm incredibly grateful."

It took only 16 minutes for the Lionesses' leading light to notch the opening goal of the tournament, grabbing the winner at Old Trafford in the hosts' curtain-raiser against Austria, which Mead describes as the side's "most nervous game". Even though they won only 1-0, it set the tone for the competition.

England followed that narrow victory with another 13 goals in their next two group games: an extraordinary 8-0 demolition of Norway in which Mead bagged a hat-trick, then a 5-0 win against Northern Ireland in which she added another goal to her tally.

Opponents became considerably tougher in the knockout stages.

"We had quite a hard run," says Mead. "We played Spain [in the quarter-finals] who are an unbelievable team in possession and very hard to get near, so I knew it was going to be hard. Another year, we could easily have crumbled at 1-0 down. This time, we had full trust and understanding in each other as a team, and we knew we were capable of doing and giving more. And that we did."

Ella Toone's equaliser and then Georgia Stanway's extra-time rocket sealed a brilliant England turnaround. In the semi-finals they had another shaky start, yet Mead was on hand to settle the nerves again by scoring the opener in a 4-0 victory against Sweden.

The country was at fever pitch, especially with the prospect of facing Germany in the showpiece, but Mead explains that manager Sarina Wiegman made the difference with her ability to not let that affect the players.

"I don't know how she does it – we think she's a genius," beams Mead. "She has such an effect on you as a person and as a team. She's direct: you know where you stand, you know your responsibilities, and you know the way we play as a team.

"Throughout the Euros, she kept us humble and out of the limelight, keeping us in our family bubble of the team. She made us feel calm even though everywhere else was so pumped and excited.

"Even in the changing room ahead of the final, she told us, 'We don't have to win but we really want to, and today is just another game of football, though of course it has a lot riding on it. We're playing a game that we love and we have to go out and enjoy it the best we can'."

For once, it wasn't Mead who hogged the headlines. Having come off with a dead leg shortly after Toone had given the Lionesses a second-half lead, Mead had to watch the rest of the final from the bench as Germany equalised to force extra time – and as her replacement, Chloe Kelly, netted the decisive goal with less than 10 minutes remaining.

"It was shocking – I'm not good at being on the sidelines and sitting on the bench," says Mead, laughing. "When Chloe's goal went in, it was if my dead leg was instantly healed – I jumped over the barriers and went on to the pitch to celebrate with her. From then on, every time Germany got past the halfway line, I was very nervous and edgy."

When the final whistle sounded, the party could get started.

Mead had been propelled into the world's attention, picking up her personal accolades before getting her hands on the European Championship trophy. Being recognised by fans has become commonplace, with TV appearances and interviews turning her into one of the country's most recognisable footballers – even if she was unfortunately captioned as partner Miedema's 'guest' on the Ballon d'Or red carpet. Mead soon learned the pitfalls of being well-known, though: an innocent holiday walk abroad descended into a swarm of selfie-hunters wanting to secure a shot with England's latest national treasure. Life has changed.

From that ordinary little girl with a blonde ponytail who had to ignore the sniggers of her opponents just to play the game she loved, Mead is now on top of the world. She'll fight back from a serious knee injury suffered in late November, too. It's what she does.

"This year, I just stripped everything back," she concludes. "We speak about pressure on people, but six-year-old Beth played football because she loved playing football, so why shouldn't 27-year-old Beth do that as well?"

We could all learn from that lesson.



“WHEN I SCORED IN THE 119TH MINUTE AGAINST GERMANY, I WENT THROUGH SO MANY EMOTIONS – MY WHOLE LIFE PASSED IN FRONT OF MY EYES”

Fabio Grosso was a low-profile left-back for Palermo prior to the 2006 World Cup – by the end of it, he’d netted one of the tournament’s most iconic goals and scored the decisive penalty in the final shootout. The Italian talks *FFT* through his journey...

Interview Daniele Verri

For my whole life, I've always been the kind of guy who constantly asks himself, 'Will I be good enough? Can I do it? Can I live up to the expectations?' It's probably because I had a peculiar playing career, almost unique. I endured many years in Italy's lower leagues before I made my breakthrough – ahead of the 2006 World Cup, I'd spent 12 seasons as a footballer and played below Serie A in eight. When I arrived in Germany for the World Cup, the first thing I asked myself was, 'What am I doing here?'



My career started far away from the World Cup, at Renato Curi in the regional leagues, then at Chieti in the fourth tier. When I finished school, I went to university so that I could postpone my mandatory military service. I loved going to uni with all my friends, and I also did exams – I wasn't thinking about what would happen next.

Up until the age of 23, I was a carefree young man still living at home with his parents, who loved playing football at weekends. I was good – I was tall, but I had some technical skills. Coaches used to play me up front, behind the strikers or as a centre-forward, and I could score too.

I was an important member of the teams I played for, and I loved that feeling. Many people tried to take me here and there, but I was happy where I was at that level, playing with pals. In 2001 though, I got my big chance – the opportunity to join Perugia in the top flight and test myself in Serie A. Suddenly I had a chance to play at a high level, to make a living out of my hobby. I left home, I took my chance.

A few days into pre-season training, the team was lacking a player at left wing-back and our manager tried me in that position. I did my best and it went well. I was fortunate – from that point on, my career developed in a different way to what I was used to. I learned a lot in the two and a half years I spent at Perugia – I got used to Serie A and even received my first call-ups for the national team.



Then I was offered the chance to join Palermo, who were playing in Serie B. Many people told me not to drop a division, but I tried to look further down the line, at the club's potential. The city and environment were stimulating – I accepted their offer and hoped to take one step back, then three steps forward. We won promotion within six months, then the next year we qualified for the UEFA Cup. In 2005-06, we only missed out on a Champions League place by a couple of points. After a one-year absence, I was back in the national team – I had two and a half splendid seasons in Sicily.

Despite my background in the lower leagues, I was able to play with real champions for the Azzurri – that was probably a quality of mine. We were a tight-knit group, and that was mainly down to the manager Marcello Lippi. We were more like a club, rather than a national team. I knew I was different. I knew I didn't have the qualities of the other players, that I hadn't had the same career. But I could adapt and find my space in that environment.



My career had started from very far away and brought me towards some success, but I always kept in mind where it all began and who I was. I kept both of my feet on the ground. I never felt like a special player, but I had the chance to play alongside true champions and I could express my potential.

When the World Cup kicked off and I was starting our first match at left-back against Ghana, that's when I asked myself what I was doing





"THAT TOURNAMENT WAS A MIRROR IMAGE OF MY CAREER – THINGS KEPT FORCING ME TO TAKE A STEP HIGHER"

there. The bar had been raised higher and higher for me, year by year, and the expectations had been raised too. At that level, people expect you to play top-class football as a full-back, but I was the same Fabio Grosso as before the tournament. I just did what I could, aware of my qualities and limits, trying to support all of the champions around me.

That World Cup was a mirror image of my entire career – some things happened and forced me to go another step higher, then another step. I'd had my chance in Serie A and thought that was a dream, then I got called up for Italy and couldn't believe it, and then a World Cup.

The same happened during that month in Germany. Every time I felt I'd touched the sky and it couldn't get any better, I had the chance to go another step higher. It was incredible – I'm so proud of what we did.

For me, the big moments began in the last 16, when I won the late penalty that sealed a 1-0 win against Australia. I thought it would be impossible to repeat a moment like that, but then came the semi-final against Germany. That was described as *the* game for us: we were in Dortmund, in their home country, and we felt responsible for all of the Italians living in Germany, who gave us so much love.

A minute from the end of extra time, the game was still 0-0 when the ball came my way thanks to a brilliant pass by Andrea Pirlo. When you play with amazing players like him, you realise they can do things that others can't. He wasn't looking at me, but I hoped he'd spotted me. He could do that – he'd see you without looking at you. Thank God he did.

When I scored, I just ran. People have compared my celebration with that of Marco Tardelli in the 1982 World Cup Final, but honestly, I didn't think about that. It was the 119th minute and I experienced so many emotions. All of the years spent preparing for that moment passed in front of my eyes – the goal opened a window into my past. When I see it back now, I still feel the same overwhelming sensations – it's difficult to put them into words. It was just fantastic to win that game – it was incredible to help our nation achieve such a sporting feat, reaching the World Cup final. As time passes, you appreciate that some of the things we did are part of people's history. They keep talking about them, even though they happened long ago. We left a mark – it makes us so proud.

Then came the final against France in Berlin, which went to a penalty shootout. I was down to take Italy's fifth. Those are crazy moments in which you think you can do anything. We were facing a France team with several players who'd won the World Cup in 1998, when many of us were playing in the Italian lower leagues. In that moment, though, the difference wasn't there any more.

I was happy to take that fifth penalty, but I wasn't expecting Lippi to ask me. He told me afterwards that because I'd been decisive against Australia and Germany, he felt I could be decisive against France too. Luckily, I converted the winning penalty and everything went his way. Every coach I had during my career helped me to develop and become a better player, but if I had to choose one, it would always be Lippi. He led us to World Cup glory and played a decisive role in it.

Things changed a lot for me after that World Cup – I became more popular. Straight after the tournament, I went to the seaside with my mates, as I did every year, but soon had to return home because I felt too much pressure – people were pouring love on me. Paradoxically it was complicated, as I wasn't used to that level of attention.

But over time I learned to handle it in a balanced way, and had the chance to play in the Champions League for huge clubs like Inter, Lyon and Juventus. I remained a normal guy – at least that's what people around me say, and that's important. My real pals are the same ones I had before that World Cup.

Last year, I took charge of Frosinone in Serie B – I've previously been the manager of Juventus' youth team, Bari, Hellas Verona, Brescia and Sion. I'm very happy that I've always been able to do what I love – my passion has turned into my work, which I do with the seriousness and professionalism of a job, plus the passion and enthusiasm of a hobby.

Frosinone is a solid, serious club, and the whole of the city welcomed me with open arms. COVID brought some financial issues for us, as it did for most clubs, but we changed a lot of things last season thanks to the work of our sporting director. We recruited young players from the lower leagues, supported by more experienced players, and came ninth in the league which we were happy with. We started even better this season, but we know that Serie B is a difficult division.

It's also a league that contains several of my Azzurri team-mates – this campaign, Serie B began with Pippo Inzaghi coaching Reggina and Gianluigi Buffon playing for Parma. Later on, Fabio Cannavaro became boss of Benevento and Daniele De Rossi was appointed at SPAL. We all enjoy catching up, and the 2006 squad still have a WhatsApp group.

Our relationship is excellent – we shared the biggest emotions. Even if we don't talk to each other for a while, when we do it feels like time hasn't gone by. We're bound by something so big – it's like an invisible thread. In 2006, we went through unforgettable experiences together. Those memories will never fade away.

Anti-clockwise from top right Grosso went from Serie B stopper to World Cup winner within two years; his semi stunner triggered Tardelli-style mania; then he clinched Italy glory in the final

"WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT?"

Roy Keane was the beating heart of a Manchester United side that ruled the Premier League, before he dominated the dugout and TV studio too. When he's around, though, confrontation follows...

Words Chris Flanagan **Portrait** Sky Bet / Nick Eagle

Additional reporting Ian Murtagh, Ryan Baldi, James Hilsum, Ed McCambridge, Sean Cole, Chris Evans



"Up the f**king stairs now, into my office. Everyone. Let's go and watch that f**king video."

The entire Manchester United squad had just been ordered to gather around the television inside Sir Alex Ferguson's quarters at the club's Carrington training ground. They were unsure what they were about to witness.

Roy Keane stood anxiously in front of the TV, aware of what was at stake. His career, a reputation he had built over 12 glorious years at Old Trafford, rested on this. When the tape reached its conclusion on this biting November 2005 afternoon, Ferguson let rip. "It's a disgrace, this f**king video."

The squad had just seen Keane's withering MUTV assessment of their recent 4-1 defeat at Middlesbrough; his first act of punditry, so blunt that it was never aired, and deemed so incendiary that reports suggested the tape was destroyed – "like it was a nuclear weapon or something," as Keane would incredulously describe it later.

Inside Ferguson's office, the 34-year-old attempted to stand his ground, believing that he had done nothing wrong and that he had the support of his team-mates. For once, this was a battle he couldn't win.

"Why don't you shut the f**k up?" he asked Edwin van der Sar, when the goalkeeper spoke in favour of Ferguson. "Do you always make love to your wife in the same position?" he randomly blurted out towards assistant Carlos Queiroz, while forcefully insisting that training was becoming monotonous. "You as well, gaffer: we need f**king more from you," Keane raged at Ferguson, before storming out of the room.

Days later, his Manchester United career was over. In the end, the determination, the standards, the relentless drive that saw him push his team-mates to seven Premier League titles, four FA Cups and a remarkable Champions League triumph, was also the cause of his downfall.

It was why the Irishman was box office from the very start of his career, and why he continues to be box office today. Greatness teetering on the brink of explosion. Roy Maurice Keane has never been boring.

WATCH OUT, JOHN BARNES

Perhaps it's no surprise that Keane could have been a boxer. In his home city of Cork, he won all four of his bouts as a youngster. His tenacity was unrivalled. Eventually he chose football – as a Spurs supporter, he had idolised silky playmaker Glenn Hoddle, the antithesis of what Keane later became.

His dream was to go and play in England. Believing he had impressed during trials for Ireland's national schoolboys squad, the 14-year-old was heartbroken not to earn selection, deemed "just too small" by chief scout Ronan Scally. The same reason was given when Brighton offered him a trial but backed out 24 hours before he was due to travel. Rejection letters came from Chelsea, Derby, Aston Villa, Sheffield Wednesday – even Nottingham Forest. A disconsolate Keane would often stay in bed until 1pm, getting up only to watch *Neighbours*. As a teenager, he lurched from job to job and was variously employed as a labourer and a potato picker.

His big break eventually came in unlikely circumstances: an FAI Youth Cup match for Cobh Ramblers Under-18s, which the team lost 4-0 to Belvedere after nearly missing kick-off because of heavy traffic. Enraged by that bad build-up, Keane played out of his skin, refusing to give up when his team-mates had long since done so, and catching the eye of a watching Forest scout.

A trial followed, and then a contract. After spending pre-season with the reserves, the 19-year-old ascended to the first team in time for the second game of the campaign.

"We were playing Liverpool away, and this young kid was sitting on the bus," former Forest right-back Brian Laws tells *FFT*. "Brian Clough would regularly take kids with us to get experience. I don't think anyone spoke to him – no one knew who he was."

The day before, Keane was disappointed to be named as a substitute for a reserve game against Rotherham and had gone out for "six or seven pints" with team-mates after. He had got home at 2am.

"We got to Anfield," continues Laws, "and, as I thought, he was just pushing the skips into the dressing room and helping to put the kit out. Halfway through, he was putting the No.7 shirt out when Cloughie stopped him and said, 'Now, son, I want you to try that shirt on.' We all started laughing, and this poor lad was embarrassed. He reluctantly put it on, as though he wanted to get it off as quickly as possible.

"Cloughie said, 'You look a million dollars – you look so good, you're playing'. We still thought it was a wind-up, but he was deadly serious. He said to me, 'You look after him: he's playing right wing'. I thought, 'What? I'm playing against John Barnes, and now I've got a rookie playing in front of me?'

"WITHIN FIVE MINUTES, ROY HAD STAMPED ON BARNES, TAKEN OUT ANOTHER PLAYER AND, WHEN JOHN WAS ON THE FLOOR, HE JUST WENT 'FK OFF' IN HIS FACE"**



Below Keane made his name in England at Nottingham Forest under Brian Clough

"I introduced myself. I didn't even know his name – I had to ask him. I said, 'Look, Roy, keep it simple and I'll try to talk you through it'. But within five minutes of kick-off, Roy had stamped on Barnes, taken out another player, and when John was on the floor he just went, 'F**k off' in his face! There were five minutes of me looking after Roy, then he looked after me for the rest of the game.

"He was like a rat up a drainpipe, all over the place. It can be frightening to go out there at Anfield, but he had no fear. He didn't care who he was playing against: he would have a go at them. What a debut."

Keane's whirlwind progress took him as far as the FA Cup final against boyhood club Tottenham that campaign, aided by smart man-management from Clough, who would often give him time off to visit family in Cork.

"Roy saw Cloughie as a father figure, but he'd bring Roy down a peg or two when he needed it," says Laws. "He even punched him." That came after an FA Cup third round clash against Crystal Palace, when a Keane backpass cost Forest a goal.

There were more fisticuffs on a squad break to Jersey. On a night out, Keane ended up fighting a man and scrabbling around on the pub floor. "Cloughie sent him home," recalls Laws. "We were shocked – we'd never seen him do that before. But he punished him that way rather than taking him out of the team."

Keane soon received a Republic of Ireland call-up and helped Forest to victory away at Manchester United in two consecutive seasons, even operating at centre-back on occasion. In 1992-93, he did what he'd done for Cobh's U18s: shine brighter than ever in a struggling team. Keane was named in the PFA Team of the Year even though Forest finished bottom of the new Premier League, in Clough's final campaign before retirement.

"The backpass rule came in and other teams got fitter, because the ball was in play a lot more, but Cloughie stuck to how he had always approached things," says Laws. "In the last 15 minutes of matches, we would struggle physically. But Roy's consistency was incredible. I very rarely saw him have a bad game. He set his own standards, and he kept them. We knew he was going to move. It was only a matter of time."



Above Hard man. Hard hat. Hard look to pull off, too



"HOW THE FECK DID YOU GET MY NUMBER?"

Keane had been aware of interest from Blackburn for several months. Rovers manager Kenny Dalglish even encouraged him to insert a clause in the new contract he signed in that 1992-93 season, allowing him to leave if Forest were relegated. Blackburn agreed a £4m fee, but by the time personal terms were finalised on a Friday afternoon, Ewood Park staff had gone home for the weekend. The transfer would have been completed on the Monday, only for Keane to receive a call from Alex Ferguson before then and opt for the newly crowned champions. "You're a wee bastard," Dalglish told him when he found out. "You won't get away with this. Nobody does this to Kenny Dalglish."

Keane accepted a lesser salary to join Manchester United, who even wrangled a lower transfer fee – though £3.75m was still a British record. In his first season, he helped the club to win their first ever Double, picking up an elite-level mentality that he took with him to the 1994 World Cup.

"In the early '90s, the relationship between footballers and the media was completely different," says Paul Lennon, former chief football writer at the *Irish Daily Star*. "After international games, the players would go to a nightclub called Rumours in Dublin – the owner cordoned off an area for footballers and journalists, so we would drink with them until 4am or 5am. On one night out, Roy gave a colleague the exclusive that he was joining Manchester United, not Blackburn.

"I remember ringing him a few days after he joined Nottingham Forest. He was in digs, so his landlady answered the phone and put me on to him. We'd speak quite regularly and chat in the lobbies of hotels. He was very approachable – he'd even talk off the record.

"When he switched to United, though, everything changed. The last phone call I had with him was short and sweet. Mobile phones had just come in and I'd barely had time to say who it was before he said, 'How the feck did you get my feckin' number?'"

Keane shackled Roberto Baggio as Ireland shocked Italy 1-0 in their World Cup opener. Progression to the last 16 was considered a success, but the midfielder was irritated by what he perceived as an amateur approach, even under legendary boss Jack Charlton.

Players flew economy class, sitting with fans, then were flogged in intense training sessions in the searing heat. After going out to the Netherlands, Keane was called in for a random drugs test and the team bus left without him, forcing him to stand outside the stadium, trying to get a lift back to the hotel. When he finally got there, he was surprised to find everyone celebrating their tournament, rather than hurting at the defeat. "There was nothing to celebrate," he later said. "The whole thing was a fraud."

At Manchester United, Eric Cantona remained the alpha male, the man most ▸

prone to explosion. Keane was quickly emulating him, though. Three months after the infamous night when Cantona was sent off for violent conduct against Crystal Palace in January 1995, Keane did the same, stamping on Gareth Southgate's gonads during an FA Cup semi-final. At least he didn't kung-fu kick a supporter on the way off.

He was sent off twice more at the start of the 1995-96 season but drove Manchester United to win another Double, then bagged his third Premier League title in 1996-97 despite another red card in a memorable 6-3 defeat to Southampton.

That summer, Cantona retired, aged 31. Keane became captain and dressing-room leader, but things got off to a horrific start. Two days before a match at Leeds, Keane sparked newspaper headlines by going out drinking and then ending up in a brawl. At Elland Road, Alf-Inge Haaland darkened his mood further by niggling away during an intense midfield battle. Keane reacted by attempting to foul the Norwegian, but succeeded only in snapping his own cruciate ligament. "Get up, stop faking it!" was Haaland's response.

When physio Dave Fevre darted onto the field to treat him, the Irishman was clearly still furious. "His mind wasn't on the injury," Fevre tells *FFT*. "In the treatment room, I assessed his knee and thought, 'Cruciate'. When we went to the hospital, we sat there, watching *Blankety Blank* on TV. He turned it off and said, 'So, Dave, what the f**k's going on?' I told him that I thought he'd done his cruciate, but we were waiting for a specialist. 'So let's get the f**k on with it!' he said.

"You don't operate in the first week, because you need to get the swelling down. A week on, the swelling had settled and Roy was determined he could play on. I told him, 'Roy, I'm not being funny, but...' He said, 'No, no, I'll be able to play – I want to go and try it'. We went to play basketball, but his knee just buckled.

"During his rehab, we did a pool session while Uwe Rosler and Alan Kernaghan from Manchester City were sat in the jacuzzi, not doing anything. Roy said, 'What the hell's going on? Look at the City lads'. I told him that's why they played for City and Roy for United. It was a completely different mentality. Roy said, 'You're right. Let's get on with it'. His work ethic was phenomenal."



Above His display against Juve in the semi-finals of the 1998-99 Champions League has entered Red Devils folklore

"IT WAS THE ULTIMATE EXAMPLE OF A PLAYER DOMINATING, EVEN THOUGH HE'D MISS THE FINAL"

STARING DIRECTLY INTO THE SUN

The injury ended Keane's hopes of making the 1998 World Cup – without him, the Republic of Ireland lost a play-off to Belgium. Returning for the Charity Shield against Arsenal, it was clear he was as strong as ever. "He smashed Patrick Vieira," recalls Fevre. "If his cruciate could stand up to that, I knew it would stand up to anything."

Back from injury, Keane had plenty to be motivated about in 1998-99. It began with a pre-season fight with Peter Schmeichel, inside a Hong Kong hotel at 2am. The pair scrapped in the corridor on the 27th floor, Keane headbutting Schmeichel to leave the Dane with a black eye, and waking up Bobby Charlton, who witnessed the commotion.

It had no lasting effects on team harmony. By April, Keane was helping United to challenge for glory on three fronts. In the FA Cup semi-final replay against Arsenal, Schmeichel stopped his team-mate from becoming the villain by saving Dennis Bergkamp's penalty, shortly after Keane had been sent off. Ryan Giggs' solo goal won it.

Seven days later came the defining night of Keane's career. Echoing his Cobh Ramblers and Nottingham Forest days, the midfielder came to the fore when the chips were down as United trailed 2-0 at Juventus in the Champions League semi-final second leg. Just like Steven Gerrard for Liverpool against Milan in 2005, the captain turned the tide with a near-post header, when all hope of European glory looked lost. Refusing to be defeated, Keane seized midfield control against Didier Deschamps, Edgar Davids and Antonio Conte and powered Ferguson's side to a 3-2 triumph, despite picking up a yellow card that would rule him out of the final.

"That was the ultimate example of one player dominating, just wanting it so much," says Wes Brown, an unused substitute that night. "He knew that he had a yellow card, but he just drove on. He was willing to do everything, to do other people's jobs, despite knowing he was going to miss the final."

United owed their Treble to that display, even if the final weeks of the season weren't vintage Keane, arrested for another pub altercation as he celebrated clinching the Premier League. In the FA Cup final, injury forced him off after nine minutes.

It couldn't put a dampener on a historic season, and Keane made sure to say thanks to the physio who had got him back on the field. "I moved on to Blackburn and on my first day, a present arrived for me," reveals Fevre. "It was from Roy and his wife, Theresa – some beautiful Waterford Crystal. That was his gratitude. He's such a top guy."

Juventus and Bayern Munich attempted to lure Keane away from Manchester United, but the midfielder soon signed a bumper new contract at Old Trafford, a week after scoring the winner in the Intercontinental Cup against Palmeiras in November.

He also netted six times in the Champions League in 1999-2000 and bagged both goals

"THE ORIGINAL MENTALITY MONSTER"

Republik of Mancunia's Scott Patterson (@R_o_M) hails a Manchester United great

Whenever Manchester United fans discuss the club's greatest captain or their favourite all-time player, Roy Keane's name will always come up.

His impeccably high standards, desperation to win and desire to lead by example raised the levels of those around him. United were a better team because of him.

Keane was the original mentality monster – he wasn't afraid to leave his boot in and he wouldn't back down from a fight. But that sometimes allows people to view him merely as a player who worked very hard and was a tough nut. That's an unfair reduction of an incredibly talented footballer and a great passer of the ball, who could finish well, read the game, time a tackle and inspire the best in others.

Almost 20 years after he left the club, we've still not found a player fit to fill his boots, which maybe explains why his name is still so regularly sung by the Stretford End. Keano is a United legend; the sort of captain you dream of representing your club.







in a key Premier League victory at Arsenal, featuring another mid-match confrontation with Vieira, as the Red Devils took yet another Premier League title. Keane, at the apex of his career, was named both PFA Player of the Year and FWA Footballer of the Year, setting ever-higher standards that he also expected from the rest of the United squad, young players included.

"I remember my first training session with the first team," Luke Chadwick tells *FFT*. "I was on Roy's team, and I gave the ball away a couple of times. He told me in no uncertain terms that my performance wasn't up to standard. I was thinking, 'F**k, I've blown it now'. When we went inside after training, I expected another bollocking from him – I was so nervous. But he pulled me to one side and explained that there was a level he expected of all of us, and it was his job to make sure we were at it every day. It didn't matter if it was me, Ryan Giggs or David Beckham; he said he'd speak to everyone in the same way if standards weren't right.

"He was intimidating – terrifying, even – but he was the ultimate captain. He would be so supportive during games. He looked out for us on the pitch. If we gave everything, then he would fight for every last one of us."

Top Roy took his revenge on Haaland, who in turn spawned the ultimate City goal-bot **Above** "Dave Jones is a better presenter than Gary Lineker"

Wes Brown concurs. "Not a lot of people know this, but Roy was the first player to come over and congratulate you when you'd done something good," the former defender says. "He'd pat you on the back, saying, 'Well done, keep that going'. People didn't see that side of him. On the flipside, if he thought you were slacking, you were going to get it. He knew what it took to make it at the highest level – what it took to win. If you wanted to be a winner, he was your man."

David Bellion remembers another side to the Irishman. "Whenever I think of Roy Keane, I always think of Ricky Gervais," the ex-United forward explains. "He's got that dry sense of humour – dark, but funny. Very intelligent and sarcastic.

"We had a Christmas party once and he wore a T-shirt saying something like, 'Nobody speaks to me'. Everybody laughed about that. Inside the club, everyone loved him, but we knew that in the outside world, a lot of people feared Roy Keane and weren't very comfortable talking to him. You're not going to look at the sun with no sunglasses.

"He was the best captain I ever had. I had a good relationship with him – we did yoga together quite a lot. He was surrounded by unbelievable players, like Paul Scholes, Ryan Giggs, Rio Ferdinand and Gary Neville, but they all saw him as a leader. His brain is different: he's hypersensitive, which isn't a bad thing. He pushed things to the maximum because he was obsessed with detail. Whether he was right or wrong, you had to respect his opinion."

"DOGS DON'T TALK S**TE"

Controversy clung to Keane like black mould on a 1960s avocado bathroom suite. He offered to give up the captaincy following a red card for his tackle on Chelsea's Gus Poyet during the 2000 Charity Shield, but Ferguson talked him around. Within the next 13 months came the red card for his revenge tackle on Haaland in a Manchester derby, then another for lashing out at Alan Shearer at St James' Park.

Frustrated by an injury-interrupted 2001-02 in which Manchester United failed to win a trophy, Keane headed off to what should have been a second career World Cup. What followed was his biggest flashpoint.

"Mick McCarthy and Roy hadn't got on particularly well since an incident in Boston 10 years earlier," says journalist Paul Lennon; back then, McCarthy was the Irish team captain, for a summer tour to the USA. "A number of younger players had gone out for a few drinks. Roy got back just as the main group were getting on the bus for the flight back home. A few of us overheard Mick accusing Roy and the others of being late. Roy wasn't going to take it lying down, so he had a go back. The chemistry between them was never right from that moment."

Keane's first game under McCarthy's management went no better. In the 1996 home friendly against Russia, the stand-in captain was shown a red card after kicking Omari Tetradze petulantly in the kneecap.

Perennially frustrated by organisational standards within the Irish setup, Keane had a seemingly productive talk with McCarthy before qualifying for the 2002 World Cup, to discuss a more professional approach. But still the midfielder was irritated by the food provided for players, by travel arrangements, and finally by the events of Saipan, Ireland's unlikely pre-tournament training base in the Pacific Ocean's Northern Mariana Islands.

"I was at the training ground on the first day, and Roy had a point when he complained the pitch was below par," says Lennon. "He wasn't alone, especially after Steve Finnan picked up an injury.

"Roy also got upset when the main kit arrived 24 hours late – that wasn't an issue for most of them, but it was to him. He was arguing with everyone by this stage. I saw him at the hotel having a row with some of the senior pros, including Steve Staunton and Niall Quinn, as well as goalkeeping coach Packie Bonner. Things were escalating.

"Later that day, he'd had enough and told McCarthy he was leaving. He was persuaded ▸



to stay after talking to his solicitor and Alex Ferguson, and we assumed that'd be it. But then Roy gave his exclusive to *The Irish Times*, slagging off McCarthy and the facilities.

"That was when the manager called a team meeting and read out the article in front of everyone. Roy totally lost it."

McCarthy had incensed Keane during the meeting by accusing him of faking an injury to miss the second leg of the 2002 World Cup play-off against Iran. Perhaps it was just as well he didn't play – Keane and Tehran's infamous Azadi Stadium was a recipe for fireworks – but the player was adamant that he wasn't fit, nor had he been in the first leg, battling knee pain to help Ireland win 2-0.

"Mick, you're a liar," thundered Keane. "You're a f**king wanker. I didn't rate you as a player, I don't rate you as a manager and I don't rate you as a person. You can stick your World Cup up your bollocks."

Lennon and the assembled press pack were waiting outside. "The players were ashen-faced," he remembers. "They told us Roy had been sent home."

After spending his summer walking the legs off his dog, Triggs, in front of the chasing media – "Unlike people, dogs don't talk s**te," he later said – Keane didn't start the new season too well. He was soon handed not one but two suspensions: three matches for elbowing Sunderland's Jason McAteer, one of the Irish squad in Saipan, and five matches for appearing to reveal in his autobiography that his foul on Haaland, fully 16 months earlier, had been premeditated.

"I'd waited long enough, I f**king hit him hard," he wrote. "The ball was there (I think).

"WHEN THE INTERVIEW CAME OUT, WE KNEW ROY WOULDN'T PLAY FOR UNITED EVER AGAIN"

Take that you c**t, and don't ever stand over me again sneering about fake injuries." He later insisted that he had never meant to injure Haaland – only to hurt him.

Despite the bans, Keane still ended the season with his seventh Premier League title. It would be his last. In 2003-04, Manchester United finished third behind Arsenal's Invincibles and Roman Abramovich's Chelsea, with the midfielder sent off in the first leg of a famous Champions League exit to Jose Mourinho's Porto. His side finished third again in the next campaign as Mourinho took the title to Stamford Bridge, despite a United victory at Highbury preceded by Keane's "I'll see you out there" tunnel row with Vieira.

Above "Oh, you mucky pup, you missed a spot" **Below** Roy and Mick never did see eye-to-eye



By the start of the 2005-06 season, Keane was 34, experiencing hip issues and in the last year of his contract, growing ever more frustrated at declining results and what he viewed as declining standards. His relationship with Carlos Queiroz had become strained, following a disagreement over a villa that United's assistant had chosen for him during a training camp in Portugal, which Keane believed to be unsafe for his children. When even Ferguson laid into him about it, the enforcer started to fear that he was becoming persona non grata.

An injury from a Steven Gerrard tackle in a September fixture at Liverpool left him on the sidelines, ruling him out of the Republic of Ireland's final World Cup qualifiers, after an international comeback under Brian Kerr. They didn't qualify, so Keane never made it to a second World Cup – and he'd never play for Manchester United again, either.

After every United game, one player was obliged to visit the MUTV studio. Keane's turn came for a home match with Spurs, only for Ferguson to give him time off. Instead, he was asked to do the analysis for the following game at Middlesbrough. United lost 4-1, leaving them sixth in the league behind Wigan, Bolton and Charlton.

In a forerunner to the punditry career that followed, Keane wasn't exactly complimentary, to such an extent that the analysis was pulled from air. Ferguson was furious, despite Keane believing that everything he'd said had been fair.

"I wasn't ranting and raving," he insisted. "The message was that we weren't good enough. I couldn't say we had played well."



Keane spoke to the squad to reassure them about what he'd said, but Ferguson ordered them upstairs to watch the video themselves. Conflicting views remain.

"If you watch it, he didn't do anything *wrong* – it wasn't that bad," Wes Brown, speaking courtesy of Bet365, insists. "As captain he'd say, 'you need to be stronger' or 'that isn't good enough'. This was nothing different. It blew out of all proportion."

Phil Bardsley is less sure. "Roy did overstep the mark," he tells *FFT*. "When it came out, we all knew he wasn't going to play for United again. My overriding emotion was sadness. I had huge respect for both him and the manager, so it wasn't a case of taking sides. Roy was always very good with us young lads. Growing up as a Manchester United fan, I was obsessed with being around him and learning from him."

Keane's exit wasn't immediate. He trained for a few more days, annoying Ferguson further by appealing the fine that he was given for the MUTV interview. He and his agent were then summoned to the manager's office. "We've come to the end," said Ferguson, in the presence of chief executive David Gill. Never one to show weakness, Keane agreed, and his contract was cancelled by mutual consent. He drove out of the training ground, pulled over and sobbed uncontrollably.

DIOUF, WITH THE BROKEN CHAMPAGNE GLASS

Despite his age, Keane wasn't short of offers. Everton and Bolton were keen and he turned down Real Madrid, deciding he didn't want to move to Spain nor risk being a bit-part player. Instead, he chose Celtic, but made an unfortunate start with a Scottish Cup defeat to second-tier Clyde on his January 2006 debut. Gordon Strachan's Bhoys won the league, yet Keane, with his hip causing him increasing pain, played only 13 games before opting to retire at the end of the season.

Two months later, he became the manager of Sunderland, recently relegated from the Premier League with a then-record low points total. Niall Quinn arrived as chairman that summer. Keane initially turned the job down, so Quinn took on the role himself and lost the first five matches of the season. Keane quickly had a rethink.

He was appointed three days before the close of the transfer window, and all of his August signings were former team-mates: Irish trio David Connolly, Graham Kavanagh and Liam Miller; Ross Wallace and Stanislav Varga from Celtic; plus ex-Manchester United pal Dwight Yorke from Sydney FC. By the turn of the year, Keane had moved the club up to 12th in the Championship. In the second half of the season, they surged, incredibly, to the title, going unbeaten for 17 matches.

"He wanted us to give everything," says Carlos Edwards, one of Keane's January signings. "When I met him for the first time, I was excited, and he laid out everything he wanted to achieve – he thought he could get us promoted. It was a no-brainer decision.

"He had a poker face. You never knew which Roy Keane you were going to get on any given day: if it would be angry Roy, happy Roy, sad Roy. But he always had a winning mentality, which he tried to bring to us." ▸





Above This was a common sight **Right** "You said these trousers would fit me" **Far right** A first go at managing brought instant glory in charge of Sunderland

DOWN, BUT NOT OUT

Few players have made PFA Team of the Year in a relegation season – not even 2011 Footballer of the Year Scott Parker – but Keane did, along with these four...



MICK CHANNON

Unfortunate Mick is the most-capped England player never to go to a major tournament, with 46 international appearances, and when he netted 21 goals for Southampton in 1973-74, Saints still went down. Recognition from the PFA was a small consolation.



TREVOR BROOKING

The England midfielder made the PFA Team of the Year for a second time in 1978, despite the Hammers dropping out of the top flight. In the lead-up to the 1982 World Cup, he made three more PFA line-ups, too – the Second Division team, on each occasion.



MARK WRIGHT

After starring for England at Italia 90, the centre-back continued his good form in the top flight with Derby. Not that it helped the Rams all that much: they finished rock bottom, conceding a league-high 75 goals in 38 games. Wright soon joined Liverpool instead.



ANDY JOHNSON

In his first ever Premier League season, the forward bagged 21 goals (including 11 penalties) for Crystal Palace, making him the division's highest English goalscorer. A place in the 2004-05 PFA team followed, but the Eagles went down on the last day.

Sometimes, Keane would ask the kit man to set up the tactics board ready for half-time just so he could kick it over for effect, to tell the players that the second half was about desire, not formations. He wasn't shy about enforcing discipline, either, leaving three players behind when they turned up late for the bus to an away game at Barnsley. "I was dropped for being late myself once," admits Edwards of another occasion. "I had to learn the hard way."

Edwards' fine winner against Burnley gave Sunderland the points they needed to secure promotion, when Derby failed to win a day later. "His reaction to my goal was just, 'Yeah, good' – no punching the air or hugs," the former Trinidad & Tobago international remembers. "He didn't want to show that side of him. You can still see that now on TV: he wants to smile or laugh, but he holds it back – all you get is a little smirk. People want to see the Roy Keane who's angry all the time, but that's not the case. Deep inside, he's as soft as a baby. But he's got a tough outer layer." So tough, in fact, that Keane refused to sanction an open-top bus tour to celebrate Sunderland's title win, because they had been relegated only a year earlier. He had to have fun in other ways.

"We went to Portugal for pre-season," says Edwards, "and after training, he said, 'Who wants to take a free-kick against me? It's €50 a player'. Only two or three players scored. Some who took free-kicks never paid him – he certainly wasn't happy about that!"

His first season as a Premier League boss brought its challenges. An attempt to motivate his team with a clip from *Any Given Sunday* didn't work at Everton, where Sunderland lost 7-1. A month later, defeat at Reading was followed by Keane pushing Royals assistant Kevin Dillon's head against a table and trying to pull off his tie, during the usually cordial post-match drinks.

The Black Cats were in the relegation zone when Phil Bardsley arrived in January. "He was exactly the same person as a boss as he had been as a captain," says Bardsley. "If you gave it your best shot, you'd earn his respect. He demanded the same standards, but some lads found it harder than others. He's an intimidating bloke to be around – if you get on the wrong side of him, or don't impress him, woe betide you. I prefer straight-talkers, and Roy tells you how it is. Some probably preferred the arm-around-the-shoulder approach. That wasn't his style."

Sunderland eventually finished 15th, but Keane felt that his team was too nice, so he recruited Djibril Cisse, Pascal Chimbonda, Steed Malbranque and El Hadji Diouf that summer while targeting a top-eight finish. All he'd done was create a powder-keg dressing room, leading to a nightclub incident when Diouf almost stabbed Anton Ferdinand.

"There were little wankers in the group who thought they were the best, but they were crap," Diouf later explained. "Anton was the number one wanker. If there's a crazy guy who wants to take me on, I'll show that I'm crazier than him. The first of his friends came too close to me – he ended up running away. Since I was drinking champagne, I broke my glass and attacked them."

After November's 4-1 home loss to Bolton, Sunderland were in the drop zone when new owner Ellis Short asked Keane to move house from Manchester to the North East. The manager took umbrage. A departure by mutual consent was announced that week.

"Part of his downfall was that sometimes he might only be at training two or three times a week," reflects Edwards, even if Keane insisted that he did it in order to give players a break from him. "He commuted a lot – I don't think he wanted to move to Sunderland. That left a sour taste in some players' mouths. People would ask, 'Where's the gaffer?' He lost the changing room a bit."

Below Still ready to slide-tackle any player given half a chance

"HE'S INTIMIDATING, WITH HIGH STANDARDS. WOE BETIDE YOU IF YOU'RE ON HIS WRONG SIDE"

STUN GRENADES AND PIG SLAUGHTER

Anxious about missing the boat back into management, four months later Keane went to Ipswich, ninth in the Championship. He soon realised it was a mistake, admitting





Above Keane's withering punditry has fostered an unlikely bromance with Micah Richards

that he never felt comfortable at Portman Road. Even the colour of the club's shirts annoyed him. "I don't like f**king blue – City were blue, Rangers were blue," he said.

Scarred by the way things had ended in his previous job, he went against his instincts, deciding not to rock the boat by making major changes to the backroom staff. "After Sunderland, I thought I shouldn't be so intense," he confessed. "I fell into the trap of thinking, 'This'll do'. I dropped my standards."

A pre-season trip to an army base didn't help team bonding as he had hoped. Players resented being woken up by stun grenades, and were bemused when they were forced to watch paratroopers slaughtering a pig. Telling his players, "You're all losers" after an August defeat at West Bromwich Albion may not have been his greatest idea, either. In his first full campaign, Keane recruited Carlos Edwards again, but Ipswich finished 15th.

"At Sunderland, the core of the team was already there and he brought in a few new players to make it better," says Edwards. "At Ipswich, there wasn't that kind of leadership where you could just fit in a player or two. It didn't work. He seemed a lot more hostile."

Budget cuts followed. Jonathan Walters finally got his wish of being sold to Stoke, after his attempts to leave ended in an altercation with Keane in the manager's office, and an instruction to focus on bringing through academy players didn't quite suit the boss. "He was really hard on some of them," says Edwards. "He went about it the wrong way. In this day and age, some players go into their shell if you come down on them."

Keane was sacked in January 2011, with Ipswich 19th in the Championship. He has never managed since, having spells as assistant to Paul Lambert at Aston Villa and to Martin O'Neill with the Republic of Ireland and Nottingham Forest, his own first club in England. Offered the chance to manage Celtic in 2014, he chose to stay with Ireland, enjoying his time as a number two and believing that the Scottish giants weren't trying hard enough to persuade him.

"Roy can be tough but he's great company, he's self-deprecating and he wants people to have his drive, which isn't always possible," O'Neill tells *FFT*. "With Ireland, we didn't work together every day, but he had a good influence. The players looked up to him."

Early last year, Keane spoke to Sunderland about a return as manager, rejecting the opportunity because of 'contractual issues'. The 51-year-old has been tied to a deal with Sky since 2019. In the TV studio, he has been everything he was as a player: forthright, demanding, controversial – but maybe more popular. Any Keane tirade is guaranteed to go viral on social media, while his persona inspired the makers of hit series *Ted Lasso* to give their optimistic titular manager a macho captain in 'Roy Kent'. The barely disguised Keane analogue, described by co-creator Brendan Hunt as having "intimidation with gravitas", became a cult figure himself.

Whether the real Keane will ever return to management, only time will tell, but O'Neill is sure that he could still be a success. "His spell at Sunderland was excellent," he says. "Some chairmen and owners might be a bit worried, a wee bit scared of him, but absolutely he would be successful again if that's what he wanted to do."

"I was surprised he didn't take another job after Ipswich," says Edwards. "I like watching him on the TV – I laugh, because he hasn't changed one bit. But I think he still wants that next job; he still wants to do well. He'll learn from the mistakes of his previous jobs. It's only a matter of time before he is very successful again as a manager."

As a player, as a manager, as a pundit, there have been few more compelling figures in football than Roy Keane. Greatness teetering on the brink of explosion. You never quite know which way it's going to go.

"HE RAN AROUND LIKE HE HAD FOUR LUNGS"

A host of players have paid tribute to Keane in *FourFourTwo* over the years



ANDREI KANCHELSKIS
"The best midfielder I played with. He wasn't scary in the dressing room, but on the pitch he was aggressive."



KAREL POBORSKY
"He was mad, but in a good way. Totally uncompromising, he ran around like he had four lungs."



ANDY TOWNSEND
"An awesome all-round central midfielder. There have been few better anywhere in Europe over the years."



TEDDY SHERINGHAM
"You need someone to dictate the pace of play, which Roy did perfectly. When things got tough, Keaney got going."



EMMANUEL PETIT
"I used to enjoy coming up against him for Arsenal – it was always a battle. He was a giant of the game."



BOBBY CHARLTON
"A born leader and a great team player. He didn't make many mistakes, and he always made up for it if he did."





Newly promoted Kaiserslautern stunned football a quarter of a century ago when they won the 1997-98 Bundesliga title. Otto Rehhagel, some nasal strips and the mother of all managerial meltdowns were vital, but it all began with Bayern Munich sowing the seeds of their own downfall...

OTTO'S REVENGE

Words Uli Hesse

The story of the greatest upset in Bundesliga history is also one of the sweetest revenge stories you're ever likely to hear. The fairytale started long before Kaiserslautern began to hint that they might become the first newly promoted team in history to win Germany's top flight.

Instead, it kicked off in Bayern Munich's clubhouse on the evening of April 27, 1996. A few hours earlier, FC Hollywood had lost at home to sixth-placed Hansa Rostock to slip three points behind Borussia Dortmund at the table's summit. The title wasn't yet out of Bayern's grasp, and they'd also just booked a place in the UEFA Cup final with a legendary performance against Barcelona at the Camp Nou, so there was no reason for Die Roten to panic. But panic, they did.

Bayern's distinguished and formidable triumvirate – president Franz Beckenbauer, vice-president Karl-Heinz Rummenigge and business manager Uli Hoeness – talked to several key players about the situation and their coach, 57-year-old Otto Rehhagel. As early as September, striker Jurgen Klinsmann had approached Hoeness to say Rehhagel should leave, and even the team's European heroics hadn't changed his mind. The other senior players were equally critical of the headstrong Rehhagel, whose management style was invariably dubbed "ottocratic". Beckenbauer, Rummenigge and Hoeness eventually sent the players home and called their coach into headquarters.

As Rehhagel arrived, the three men could immediately tell he didn't have the slightest idea what was coming. After some uneasy moments, Beckenbauer began to speak. "We are not happy with the team's development," explained the Kaiser. "So, we have come to the decision to relieve you of your duties."

Silence then descended upon the room. Decades on, Hoeness would recall that the four men, each one a living legend of the German game, simply stared at each other for a full five minutes. At long last, Rehhagel said, "Does this mean I can go now?" After another, briefer silence, Beckenbauer replied, "Yes." Rehhagel rose and departed the room. He didn't return to pick up his belongings, nor to discuss the dissolution of his contract. His wife saw to that instead.

"Rehhagel never talked about this, never mentioned it, but of course we all knew," says Axel Roos a good quarter of a century later. Roos, now 58, spent his entire playing career at Kaiserslautern. Only one man has made more outings for Die Roten Teufel and no one has amassed as many titles: two league championships and two German Cups. Roos first met Rehhagel in the summer of 1996, a few months after the traumatic sacking, when the coach took over a Kaiserslautern team that had just been relegated from the Bundesliga for the first time in the club's history. "We knew he'd been shabbily treated by Bayern," says Roos. "Giving someone the boot when they've taken you to a European final – you don't do that."

Clockwise from below Bayern's big names didn't take to Otto; the Betzenberg in full voice; "It's fun to stay at the Y..."; Ballack emerged during 1997-98

If revenge was on Rehhagel's mind, it would have to wait, because first he had to guide his new club back into the top flight. For a man who had single-handedly turned Werder Bremen into a national – even European – force from 1981 to 1995, joining a team in the second division seemed an odd career choice, as he must have had plenty of more attractive offers. Why did he do it?

"I think he realised that we had a great deal of potential," says Roos. "We weren't your normal relegated team. There were still many internationals there, because the club managed to hang on to key players. Wages and bonuses weren't really cut – only partly frozen. The club said we would get our money in full if and when we bounced back."

Roos pauses for a moment. "It wasn't until many years later that I found out this rule didn't apply to all of us," he adds with an understandable touch of bitterness. "Some players actually got a rise, because the club desperately wanted them to stay."

Roos is right: Kaiserslautern were not your average relegated team. A week after going down, they had won the 1996 DFB-Pokal Final against a Karlsruher side who had finished nine places above them in the table. There was controversy in their relegation, too, as



"I'M NOT A VINDICTIVE MAN – ALL I WANTED TO DO WAS WIN A FOOTBALL MATCH," INSISTED OTTO. HIS SMILE DISAGREED...



Bayer Leverkusen – who would have been demoted in their place – scored their safety-securing equaliser against Kaiserslautern on the final day after breaking the unwritten rule that you return the ball if your opponent kicks it out to allow an injured player to be treated. What's more, Kaiserslautern's Czech internationals Miroslav Kadlec and Pavel Kuka came within a whisker of winning that summer's Euro 96.

So, Kaiserslautern also weren't a run-of-the-mill promoted team when they returned to the Bundesliga a year later. In fact, there was such a buzz around the club, they could entice Swiss international Ciriaco Sforza back from Inter, as well as a 20-year-old midfielder who was considered the brightest talent in Germany: one Michael Ballack.

Another pivotal acquisition was the fleet-footed Andreas Buck, from Stuttgart. "I'd always loved Kaiserslautern's Betzenberg







ground, even as an opposing player, because the atmosphere was something else," says Buck. "So, when Rehhagel phoned me, I was willing to listen. He said all the right things, describing in detail how this fanatical crowd would go crazy when I went down the wing."

Buck's Stuttgart team-mates were stunned that he would leave a side that had qualified for Europe, outscoring champions Bayern by 10 goals, to join a promoted outfit. Buck told them that Kaiserslautern were going places. Inwardly, he wasn't so sure.

"When I signed my contract I asked the chairman, Jurgen Friedrich, to put in a clause that said I could leave for very little money should we get relegated again," Buck admits to *FFT*. "He looked at me and replied, 'Tell you what, Andy. We won't do that. Instead, we'll put a clause in there that says you'll receive a bonus for winning the league – and I'll let you choose the figure'."

Buck breaks into a grin with just the barest hint of wistfulness. "It was his way of telling me that I needn't worry about relegation. Unfortunately, I insisted on this other clause – the biggest contract mistake I ever made."

Buck's first faint inkling that he might have blundered at the negotiating table came on the opening day of the new season. Thanks to football's fine sense of irony, Kaiserslautern began their first year back in the top flight at, of all places, Bayern's Olympiastadion.

"In the week leading up to the first game, Rehhagel was very tense," recalls Buck. "We all noticed how important this game was to him, and we were acutely aware that we had the chance to do him a huge favour."

But there was, of course, the potential for another humiliation in Munich. Rehhagel's successor, Giovanni Trapattoni, had a star-studded line-up at his disposal, bolstered by the arrivals of Bixente Lizarazu – a World Cup winner 12 months later – and Giovane Elber, the free-scoring Brazilian. When Rehhagel was asked to appear on a late-night sports show five hours after the match, he said it was a silly idea: he certainly would not go anywhere near a television studio in case of a 5-0 drubbing. Only when veteran reporter Rolf Topperwien convinced him that even a narrow defeat would be honourable did Rehhagel give his provisional OK, reserving the right to renege on his word if things went pear-shaped on the pitch.

"What I remember most clearly about that game is a golden opportunity for Elber," says Roos. "He had to wait for the ball to come down. For a second or two, he couldn't do anything but ready himself for the shot, and during that time I ran over, lunged forward and managed to block it. It was a symbolic moment. Whatever they tried, we were ready for it." Ten minutes from the end, Lizarazu brought down winger Marco Reich and was fortunate to avoid a second booking. There was a different punishment, however. Sforza curled the free-kick into Bayern's penalty area and Danish international Michael Schjonberg headed the game's only goal.

When the final whistle eventually blew, the Olympiastadion's sold-out crowd of 63,000 was treated to one of German football's most famous (and deeply satisfying) solo runs. "I was down with the stomach flu, so I was watching the game at home," reflects Buck. "I'll never forget how Rehhagel ran across the pitch after the game, waving his water bottle like a piece of silverware. I must say, I was surprised at how fit he was."

Ostensibly, Rehhagel had to cross the width of the field to celebrate with the visiting supporters – but he knew very well that the 25 seconds it took him to reach the away section would have seemed like an eternity to Bayern's top brass.

When he appeared on the aforementioned sports show and was asked if the sensational shock win felt like revenge, Rehhagel replied, "I'm not a vindictive man – all I wanted to do was win a football match and we managed to do that." His mischievous smile and the ▶

little dance of his eyebrows said considerably more than his words.

Of course, even he had no way of knowing that his revenge had only just begun. Three weeks after winning in Munich, Kaiserslautern sunk the reigning UEFA Cup holders, Schalke, 3-0 without any apparent effort. That's when, by their own accounts, the players realised they could easily hold their own against any team in the league.

For a long time, however, they did not fully understand that their 1-0 opening day win had created a small gap between themselves and Bayern, which the Munich behemoths would be chasing with increasing desperation and futility. Ratinho, the Brazilian midfielder whose stage name meant 'little mouse', once remarked that Rehhagel explained how each point collected was a point against relegation. He said it so convincingly and so often that some players didn't know they were topping the table – until the festive season.

Several weeks before their crucial league meeting on December 5, Bayern had won 2-1 at Kaiserslautern in the DFB-Pokal's last 16. That lifted Trapattoni's spirits. "We have a great chance to cut the deficit to only one point," stated the Italian, "and if we play like we did in the cup, we will win."

Such was the brouhaha in the days ahead of the match, no Kaiserslautern player could continue to ignore that they were a title rival. "There were the usual verbal provocations from Bayern," says Roose. "They always do this to rattle an opponent they consider an upstart. We didn't let it get to us."

Buck says this was the evening he started to believe in the unbelievable: "Friday night, floodlights... the atmosphere was even better than I'd imagined. The Betzenberg was the kind of place where you can be 2-0 down, but you know that if you pull one back you'll win. This crowd carries you... and the other team knows it as well."

A scenario like this would come, though not on this occasion. Kaiserslautern won 2-0, the Betzenberg was a madhouse and Rehhagel finally said it: "We'll be there or thereabouts until the end of the season."

But it wasn't all love, peace and harmony. Rehhagel clashed with business manager and club icon Hans-Peter Briegel, calling the two-time World Cup finalist "an apprentice who has to win a championship before he can criticise me". He did at least talk to Briegel – young Ballack rarely had the privilege. The prodigy was even demoted to the reserves at one point as Rehhagel preferred to work with older heads like Roos, who kept Ballack out of the starting XI.

In marked contrast with the situation in Munich, those potential powder kegs never exploded. In March, Bayern lost at Schalke to fall seven points behind and nerves cracked in startling fashion. Trapattoni threw a temper tantrum at a press conference and launched into a deranged three-minute rant in garbled German later dubbed his *Wutrede*, 'anger speech', in which the Italian insulted so many of his players that his days at the club were immediately numbered.







"IN THOSE MOMENTS, PLAYERS JUST KNOW THIS IS YOUR DAY, THAT NOTHING CAN STOP YOU"

Above Rehhagel gets his revenge on Bayern as the newly promoted Roten Teufel do the unthinkable

Bayern may still have done their Bayern thing and won the title anyway, if it hadn't been for a British firm's efforts to stop people snoring. In January 1998, Kaiserslautern striker Olaf Marschall suddenly sported that most iconic of '90s accessories: a nasal strip. "Frankly, it looked daft," chuckles Roos. "But we never told him to his face." adds Buck. "I tried them once, as it seemed to help Olaf, but it just wouldn't stay on my nose." Buck doesn't know – unless he's reading this – that Marschall wore the strips, marketed as Breathe Right in the UK, because he was paid 1,000 Marks per game to do so. One of those matches made him Germany's own Robbie Fowler: the nasal strip's posterboy.

With three games left and Kaiserslautern's lead slimmed to a point, albeit with a game in hand, Rehhagel's men hosted relegation-threatened Borussia Monchengladbach. This time the team needed more than a bit of Friday night Betzenberg magic, as the visitors took a surprise 2-0 lead. Marschall scored from the edge of the penalty area, then on the hour, the marksman pushed a loose ball across the line from close range. In stoppage time he sealed the comeback with a strange looping header. "He scored that one with his shoulder more than his head," smiles Buck. "In those moments, players know. You just know that this is your day; this is your season. Nobody can stop you."

Nobody did. As Kaiserslautern pummelled Wolfsburg 4-0 on the penultimate matchday, news filtered through that Bayern were being held to a scoreless draw in Duisburg. The impossible was reality: a promoted team had won the Bundesliga.

At full-time, Ballack witnessed thousands of delirious fans invading the pitch and running towards him. He'd been getting more playing time while Roos sat on the sidelines with myocarditis, a serious heart condition. "I was released from hospital the day before the victory parade," explains Roos. "I was pretty weak, so I stayed in the background while we celebrated on an open-top bus. At one point, Rehhagel told me to come to the front – he wanted the fans to see me. That was typical of him. He knew how to build team spirit. He had the largest share in this title."

Buck agrees this miracle was Rehhagel's doing. "I remember thinking that we trained like an amateur club in the final weeks and months," he tells *FFT*. "We took our bibs and played. That was all – no drills and no tactics. Rehhagel's gift was to bring together players who know the game."

Buck pauses to revisit that heady campaign 25 years ago. "Sometimes that's all you have to do," he muses. "Let the guys play football."

"THE LAST YEAR'S BEEN HOLLYWOOD-ESQUE WITH SOME DRAMATIC TWISTS AND TURNS – IT'D MAKE ONE HELL OF A MOVIE..."



THE SECOND COMING OF CHRISTIAN ERIKSEN

A year after escaping death, the Danish midfielder has begun life at Old Trafford – if he has his way, Erling Haaland won't be the only Scandinavian making waves in Manchester this season

Words Johan Lyngholm-Bjerge

"The greatest comeback in Danish sporting history, no doubt. Watching his rise from being technically dead to pulling that famous red shirt of Manchester United over his head, it's been remarkable."

Lasse Voge, the chief football writer at *BT*, Denmark's biggest sports daily, couldn't have summed it up better. Fourteen months ago, the world watched aghast as Christian Eriksen suffered a cardiac arrest during his country's Euro 2020 opener against Finland. His life was hanging in the balance back then, never mind his career. The chances of him returning to action appeared remote, even after his revival on the pitch that day at Copenhagen's Parken Stadium. Months of silence and uncertainty followed, but the 30-year-old midfielder refused to give up. Now he's a Manchester United player, having signed a three-year contract at Old Trafford.

"My brain screamed 'hell no' but my heart kept hoping," says Voge about the possibility of seeing the playmaker run out in a football shirt again. "That June evening, most Danes accepted that his playing days were done. He's a family man, he'd just had his second child. Why would he risk another collapse? He was 29 and had realised many dreams – winning 100 caps for Denmark, playing for Tottenham in the Champions League final."

Eriksen had unfinished business, though, and more importantly an unfinished love for the game. Despite spending his life playing football, he's maintained his childish love for kicking a ball – always one of the first on the training pitch, and last to leave. Eriksen has never been a playboy or somebody who lives for social media. He's a guy from the small Danish town of Middelfart with a passion for his profession. Once the doctors gave him the green light to continue, quitting wasn't an option. A few days into January, Eriksen made his decision public: with a World Cup looming at the end of 2022, he intended to lace up his boots. ▸



When Eriksen signed for Brentford in January, it had been seven months since his sudden collapse against Finland. That summer, he'd been an Inter player and Serie A champion, clinching the Scudetto under Antonio Conte in his second season with the Nerazzurri after seven trophyless terms at Tottenham.

Eriksen's title-winning campaign hadn't come without its difficulties – he initially struggled to convince the coach to hand him starts at San Siro, but he worked his way into the first team, found his role as a controlling midfielder and proved vital in the run-in as Inter pulled away from rivals Milan. While it hadn't been one of Eriksen's finest seasons, he'd finished it with one of the biggest highs of his career. Three weeks later, however, his world changed in Copenhagen.

Eriksen was fitted with an implantable cardioverter defibrillator (ICD) to help stop such a collapse from ever happening again, but that potentially life-saving device prevented him from resuming his spell at Inter – Italian FA rules prohibit anyone with an ICD from competing. The device wasn't banned elsewhere, though, hence his switch to Brentford. The six-month deal with the Premier League newcomers was perhaps a surprising move, but joining the club's strong Danish presence, including boss Thomas Frank – his old national youth boss – made perfect sense.

JUST SIGNING FOR UNITED IS THE LATEST CHAPTER IN ERIKSEN'S FAIRYTALE. MAYBE THE BEST IS YET TO COME



The Bees had lost seven of their last eight matches and were sliding towards relegation trouble when Eriksen made his debut, as a substitute in a home defeat to Newcastle. From then on, his impact was immense. Convincing performances on his first two starts for the west Londoners – valuable wins over Norwich and Burnley – gave Brentford's season a reboot. Five more victories followed in the remaining weeks of the season, including a stunning 4-1 romp at Chelsea, to propel them up to 13th, 11 points clear of the drop zone.

"We had some good players, but Eriksen became the pivotal piece of the jigsaw," says Brentford supporter Billy Grant. "He took the players around him to another level. He enabled them to play. It worked for us and it worked for him."

Arguably, he'd been the biggest signing in the club's history. Top-flight football had already brought Brentford plenty of attention, but recruiting the Danish star had cranked it up another notch. "Eriksen signing for us was amazing," adds Grant. "No one expected us to even be in the Championship, never mind the Premier League, so it was a massive coup and significant turning point for us as a club. It showed how far we'd come in a short space of time."





Top to bottom
A remarkable return with the Red Devils; a Serie A champion at Inter; Brentford fans welcome the Dane at the start of his six-month spell

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When Eriksen confirmed his comeback in an interview months earlier, one thing stood out – his ambition to fight his way back into the Denmark fold and play at the 2022 World Cup. Being carried from the field on a stretcher was not how he wanted his career to end.

From his hospital bed in Copenhagen, he proceeded to watch his courageous team-mates regroup and go close to an astounding tournament triumph – finally thwarted by England in the semi-finals – even though he'd recently been described as irreplaceable. He wanted to return to the national team. He needed to return to the national team.

Morten Bruun, a squad member when Denmark won Euro 92 and now a pundit, saw a hugely motivated Eriksen making that announcement. "He had no doubts," says the ex-midfielder. "He was focused on representing his country at the World Cup. It wasn't about just getting back on the pitch. He wanted to be 100 per cent. As strong as ever."

Denmark boss Kasper Hjulmand wasted no time picking up the phone after seeing him play for Brentford. Just a month later, Eriksen earned his 110th cap against the Netherlands – and within two minutes of his introduction as a half-time substitute he'd scored, rifling the ball home from 15 yards. Even some of the Dutch fans were on their feet applauding.

"What really stood out for me was how natural and uncomplicated it was for him to get back into the game," says Bruun, who was at the Johan Cruyff Arena that evening. "He only needed 90 seconds to put the ball in the net."

If that was a statement of intent, it was accompanied by an even more impressive performance three days later, back at the Parken Stadium where he'd collapsed and technically died in front of his family and fans. Named as captain, Eriksen dictated play for 80 minutes against Serbia and completed the scoring in a 3-0 victory.

"I remember a situation with about 15 minutes of that game left," recalls Voge. "He was dominating – he'd taken control of every blade of grass in the Parken. In the press box, everybody looked at each other and almost laughed in disbelief, as if to say, 'Eriksen's back, and he's looking better than ever'."

Bruun agrees. "The fact he agreed to captain the team was significant," says the former Denmark international. "He accepted that everyone had come to see him and needed to see him. It was great to watch him assume that responsibility. During training a day earlier, there had been a symbolic moment when Eriksen jogged over to the exact spot where he'd fallen against Finland. It was almost like an exorcism. He needed to wipe out the devil that took him."

Eriksen has now become a devil himself – a Red Devil – after joining Manchester United over the summer, following in the footsteps of Peter Schmeichel and Jesper Olsen among other Danes. A man who originally made his name at Ajax before joining Tottenham, his ball-playing style fits the philosophy of new manager Erik ten Hag, who has arrived in England from the Amsterdam giants.

Now Eriksen will try to have the same transformative impact at Old Trafford as he had at Brentford, although that won't be an easy task. "We needed Christian Eriksen and he needed us," says Bees fan Grant. "At Brentford he was a big fish in a small pond. Now he's a medium-sized fish in a massive pond. He won't get quite the same love in Manchester that he got in west London."

Competition is considerably greater at Old Trafford. Will he be able to nail down a consistent spot in the side and influence the colossal clashes against Liverpool and Manchester City? Only time will tell. But just signing for United represents the latest chapter in the Eriksen fairytale, one that began with him being selected for Denmark's 2010 World Cup squad at 18 years of age.

The last 12 months will stand out as the most astonishing period of his career. "It's been Hollywood-esque with its dramatic twists and turns, and perhaps the best is yet to come," says Voge. "One day, it will make one hell of a movie..."

THE FUTURE IS HERE

From Chelsea's record breaker with an over-active thyroid to a Gunner who's invented a unique skill move, this gaggle of under-23s are making the Premier League the go-to destination for the next generation

Words Marcus Alves, Arthur Renard, Mark White, Jessy Parker Humphreys, Scott Patterson, Ed McCambridge

ENZO FERNANDEZ



Enzo Fernandez had just lifted the World Cup and bagged the FIFA Young Player Award when a reporter approached him for an interview. "How did you do that?" the journalist asked. "Two and a half years ago, you joined Defensa y Justicia."

The midfielder, then just 21, broke down in tears of joy and disbelief. From Defensa to River Plate, and then to Benfica, Fernandez couldn't have anticipated that a month after fielding this question having become a world champion, he'd be moving again – to Chelsea, in a British record £107 million transfer.

"What he has achieved in so little time is almost impossible," says River Plate's youth football coordinator, Gabriel Rodriguez, who has known him for more than a decade.

In mid-2020, having accumulated only nine minutes for Los Millonarios' first team, the Argentine faced a defining decision: stay in the reserves or leave his comfort zone and join Buenos Aires minnows Defensa on loan. He finally settled on the latter.

"WHAT FERNANDEZ HAS ACHIEVED IN SO LITTLE TIME IS NEAR IMPOSSIBLE"

"It could have gone either way, but fortunately he did very well there," Rodriguez tells *FFT*. So well that, after working under former Chelsea man Hernan Crespo and winning two continental trophies in a year, he was recalled early by River's boss at the time, Marcelo Gallardo. Back at El Monumental, he was still referred to as 'the other Enzo', after veteran midfielder Enzo Perez. That changed in November 2021 when Enzo Jr secured a starting berth after injuries hit the team. He hasn't looked back.

Snapped up by River Plate aged six, here he was fulfilling his childhood dream, though not without sacrifice. Among other things, '*El Gordo*' ('the fat one'), as his old team-mates nicknamed him, struggled with his weight as a kid.



"One day he told me, 'River are going to release me'," recalled his father, Raul. "The talent was there but staying in shape was hard, so I took him to a high-performance centre and he lost 5kg in a month." Those efforts were rewarded when Benfica made their €18m offer in July 2022.

Fernandez hit the ground running in Lisbon, scoring on debut in a Champions League qualifier against Midtjylland. It was as if he'd been playing in Europe all his life. A complete box-to-box midfielder with an eye for goal, he was key to Benfica topping their tough Champions League group ahead of PSG and Juventus. The Eagles had struck gold with the boy from San Martin, but despite instant interest from elsewhere, nobody expected him to leave in the winter. "Half a season is not enough," lamented Benfica coach Roger Schmidt, reacting to the non-stop questions about Fernandez's possible departure.

But it was enough to convince Argentina manager Lionel Scaloni to take him to the World Cup, even though the midfielder had played only 99 senior international minutes, split over three friendlies. Fernandez started the tournament on the bench, but after scoring a superb goal against Mexico in La Albiceleste's second group game, he became a fixture in the XI. Six years earlier, he had posted on Facebook begging Lionel Messi to reconsider his retirement from international football. Messi did so, and now the pair had celebrated ending Argentina's 36-year wait for a world crown as team-mates.

Such was the hype around Fernandez after Qatar 2022, it became impossible for Benfica to keep him for six more months. They tried up until the very last minute, but Fernandez and his agents, having previously insisted that the Portuguese club would be "a trampoline" to a bigger stage, did everything possible to secure a high-profile switch to Chelsea. They got their wish on deadline day, to the chagrin of Benfica's fans. He's now *persona non grata* in Lisbon, not that he cares.

The youngest of five brothers is used to taking hard decisions since the day he made that unorthodox choice to join the less-than-fashionable Defensa on loan. The South American sensation, who delivered a fine assist on his second Chelsea start, hates the comfort zone, which is just as well as the Blues certainly aren't in one. Perfect for Fernandez, then.

CODY GAKPO

When a deadline-day move to the Premier League with Southampton fell through last summer, Cody Gakpo refused to sulk. Determined to make his switch across the North Sea, the PSV forward knuckled down and looked to January. Scoring in each of the Netherlands' three group matches at Qatar 2022 meant he followed in the exalted footsteps of Johan Neeskens (1974), Dennis Bergkamp (1994) and Wesley Sneijder (2010) in finding the net in three successive World Cup fixtures; unlike the others, Gakpo did so in his first ever tournament appearances.

A winter-window transfer for Gakpo seemed inevitable, but it was Manchester United who were mentioned most as his destination. United manager and compatriot Erik ten Hag knew him extremely well from the Eredivisie, but the timing didn't work out: Ten Hag had already recruited a winger from the Dutch league, Antony, for around £82m, and there were cash issues at Old Trafford.

Announced in late December, Liverpool's purchase of Gakpo came as something of a surprise. The Reds' interest hadn't been well documented, but a price tag of around £45m resembled a bargain, especially for a 23-year-old yet to enter his best years.

With Jurgen Klopp's side in transition, the versatile forward's form had been patchy until he opened his account in February 13's Merseyside derby – the Reds' first league win of 2023. But Gakpo isn't one to shy from a challenge. Steely focus and determination are two traits that have characterised his career so far. When that Saints move failed to materialise, he made the mature decision to remain at PSV. Later that night, he scored a lethal – and possibly cathartic – hat-trick in a 7-1 shellacking of Volendam.

Gakpo had been at PSV since he was just eight years old, rising through the ranks and shining with technique, touch and a plethora of goals. He can play various positions across the frontline and his hero was Pele: not an obvious choice for someone born in 1999, perhaps, yet he used to watch video clips of O Rei before his own games.

He operated mostly from the left wing in Eindhoven and that could well be his ideal position, drifting inside to let fly with his preferred right foot, but with the Netherlands at the World Cup he featured as a No.10 or through the middle in a two-pronged attack. Gakpo further distinguished himself in the past couple of seasons with some incredible dribbling moves and various eye-catching goals struck from long range, all reminiscent of Inter's former Brazilian striker, Adriano.

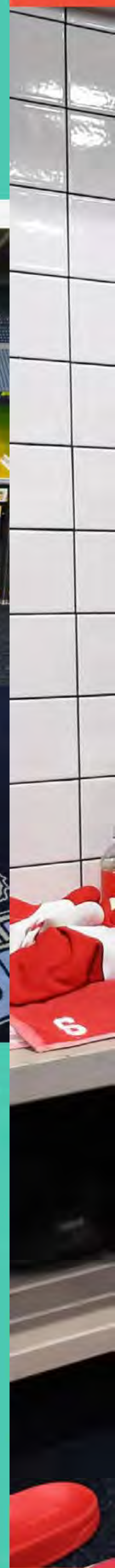
During Gakpo's academy days, another talisman from that era, Ruud van Nistelrooy, gave him finishing lessons. The two reunited last summer when the former Manchester United poacher was appointed head coach of PSV. Gakpo's trajectory continued upwards: 13 goals and 17 assists in 24 games preceded that impressive World Cup turn.

Van Nistelrooy hit 95 goals in 150 Premier League matches, a tally bettered by only two Dutchmen: Robin van Persie and Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink. Gakpo has both the time and the talent to put himself in their bracket.

GAKPO HAS THE TIME AND THE TALENT TO MATCH VAN NISTELROOY, VAN PERSIE AND HASSELBAINK







ANTHONY GORDON

Few would think twice about swapping perennial basket cases Everton for a Saudi-supercharged Newcastle. But Anthony Gordon's feelings were bittersweet, as he left his boyhood club.

"Like any young Scouser living two minutes from the ground, I dreamt of scoring at Goodison Park," he said after his £40m January move. "I love this club." Toffees fans flooded phone-ins and social media, their heartache audible.

Gordon represented hope in years of ongoing misery. Rafa Benitez blocked a loan to Hamburg before the 2021-22 campaign and the wideman seized his first-team chance, displaying the balance and close control to get bums off seats as he struck seven times in 78 games.

Benitez's replacement, Frank Lampard, slapped a monster valuation on the 22-year-old's head after he helped to save the club from relegation last term. Suitors Chelsea were deterred, but the Magpies swooped six months later. Will the "huge attributes, huge potential" of which Eddie Howe speaks be realised?



WILLIAM SALIBA

Johan Cruyff had *that* turn, Ronaldinho came to define the elastico and Zinedine Zidane the majestic pirouette. This season, William Saliba has invented the 'headstart', an idiosyncratic skill move in which the Arsenal centre-half plays the offside trap with the rest of his backline, then races back to win the ball anyway in a fluid motion.

One of the standout young centre-backs in Europe, the Frenchman is simultaneously modern and classic: quite the composed ball-player, supreme in possession and three steps ahead of his opponent, yet capable of 'the crunch' or reacting like lightning to a goalmouth scramble. Laurent Koscielny via Tony Adams, if you like. Have you beaten Arsenal's ever-advancing high line? Well, that 6ft 4in shadow comes racing towards you like a guard hound.



Saliba's breakout – and earworm chant to the tune of *Tequila* by the Champs – in the Gunners' unexpected title challenge has solved the mystery of his whereabouts. Originally signed for Unai Emery in 2019, with Arsenal batting away rivals Spurs for the Frenchman's signature, the teenager was loaned back to Saint-Etienne to hone his craft. He returned to London a year later and inherited the No.4 shirt, but had to wait 18 months for his debut. In that time, he endured two more loans and his squad number being nicked by Ben White.

Some wondered if he just wasn't Mikel Arteta's type. Saliba himself wasn't sure.

"It gave me a little slap to say, 'You are nobody'," he later admitted of the Spaniard's perceived cold shoulder. "You can be bought for €30 million, arrive [at] a club and [they] put you aside. I took this experience by being positive. I feed on it. I know what it's like not to play for six months. Today, I want to play every game."

Arteta questioned himself, too. "The way the relationship started, [I wondered] if there was any damage there because he had certain expectations," he claimed, after 18 months of justifying why he'd sent a wonderkid on loan three times, following every individual error or backline blunder from David Luiz or Pablo Mari. "He was so committed just to play for Arsenal."

Saliba wanted to play every game and now he's one of the first names on the team-sheet, having struck up a telepathic relationship alongside Gabriel Magalhaes to his left. Somehow, Arsenal have stumbled upon the perfect defensive partnership. Or was it on purpose? It's impossible to tell with a centre-back capable of both leaving his prey offside and catching it moments later. At 21, he could become even better.

How much better is up to him.

MOISES CAICEDO

Moises Caicedo doesn't even turn 22 until November, but he plays with the maturity of a veteran. And in an era of three-man midfields where specific skill sets dominate, the Ecuadorian's energy, ability to win the ball and thrust to do something with it recalls an all-action Roy Keane or Patrick Vieira, who dabbled in a bit of everything in a 4-4-2.

Brighton's No.25 has been a catalyst for the Seagulls' sensational campaign. In his opening-day masterclass at Old Trafford, Caicedo was everywhere, shielding the defence and driving forward. From there he has grown a couple of inches every week, as Roberto De Zerbi's men head into uncharted territory with Europe on the horizon.

The South Coast side have sold half a dozen first-team players in the past 18 months, yet they felt sufficiently emboldened to snub an eye-watering January offer for Caicedo. Arsenal's late clamour was badly timed and put a few noses out of joint, but it shows just how talented he is. The midfielder is key to an exciting team doing something monumental. Caicedo is Brighton's glue.



ALEJANDRO GARNACHO

Manchester United fans won't look back too fondly on 2021-22, but one moment did provide them with a reason to cheer. Four days after the first team's 4-0 battering away at Brighton, the Red Devils' kids took to the Old Trafford pitch for the FA Youth Cup final against Nottingham Forest.

They had an early lead, only to be pegged back just before half-time. A packed stadium – 67,492 doubled the record attendance for a Youth Cup game – awaited inspiration. And with 12 minutes to go, Alejandro Garnacho provided it. The Argentine earned a penalty, converted it with consummate ease, and celebrated in front of the Stretford End with the trademark 'SIUUUUU' celebration of his hero, Cristiano Ronaldo.

Then, as the clock ticked down, Garnacho picked up the ball on the left wing, twisted two defenders inside out and dispatched a second goal, admittedly via a deflection, to hand United the title for a record-extending 11th time. It wouldn't be too long before he was lighting up Old Trafford again.

Yet Garnacho's transition from youth to first team wasn't smooth, following reported attitude problems on a pre-season tour. The wideman eventually joined the seniors only to discover a bleak mood, with United bottom after two matches. The club was in a spiral.

But Garnacho's willingness to get forward, skip past seasoned opponents and have a go had supporters excited. Finally: a player to thrill them, with remarkable fearlessness.

His first professional goal came after only two hours of first-team action: a November winner against Real Sociedad in the Europa League. The 18-year-old became the club's youngest non-English goalscorer in Europe, a record hitherto held by George Best.

With goals and assists in all four senior competitions to choose from, Garnacho's standout moment this season was a vital injury-time winner at Craven Cottage, a week after his Europa League strike. A sudden burst of pace in the 93rd minute helped him to slip unnoticed between Fulham defenders and calmly slot the ball into the far corner. An equally impressive dribble and lethal finish in February's 2-0 win at Leeds was his fourth direct goal involvement from the bench in 2022-23 – at that point, more than any other Premier League player.

Though still uncapped at senior level, Garnacho was called up to Argentina's squad for World Cup qualifiers last March at the age of just 17, which speaks volumes for how highly the new world champions rate the prospect.

Back at Manchester United he's already a fan favourite, his name replacing that of CR7 – now departed – in a repurposed chant. For him, it's the ultimate compliment. Viva Garnacho indeed.





GARNACHO'S NAME HAS REPLACED THAT OF RONALDO – HIS HERO – IN A CHANT



JULIAN ALVAREZ

While one Manchester City marksman spent winter on frozen training pitches, repeatedly firing shots past Scott Carson, the other partied under palm trees with Lionel Messi and... Salt Bae. Defences were worried about a fresh Erling Haaland; they should have focused on the ascension of Julian Alvarez.

Recruited by City on his 22nd birthday, he remained at River Plate on loan for six months before running English defences ragged and winning the World Cup – as a starter, no less, over Lautaro Martinez.

His Qatar showreel demonstrated everything that Pep Guardiola adores, too – a penchant for poaching, sure, but more importantly, electric energy out of possession and a willingness to tilt the spotlight. He would start at just about every other club in the Premier League.

Does Haaland really suit Guardiolaball? Maybe, maybe not, but Alvarez is ideal for it. Still only 23, he's one of Europe's finest attackers and a world champion, just over a year after signing for City. Imagine what he could achieve in two.

FAMILY AFFAIRS

It's not easy being the offspring of a sporting superstar, but it hasn't stopped these two showing early potential

TRINITY RODMAN



When you become the youngest player to be selected in the National Women's Soccer League Draft, the pressure to perform is set high.

When everyone already knows your name because your dad is basketball royalty Dennis Rodman, that breaks the pressure gauge.

Yet Trinity Rodman has appeared unfazed by the attention in her first two seasons as a professional footballer. In 2021, aged 18, she became the youngest ever NWSL draft pick when she was selected second overall by Washington Spirit, despite having never played a game of college soccer in her life.

Rodman originally intended to play for the Washington State Cougars, but when her freshman college campaign was cancelled due to the pandemic, she decided to go pro. Central to Spirit's Championship-winning side in her first season, she will have no regrets.

"You always knew she had very special capabilities," said her youth coach at the So Cal Blues, Greg Baker. "She was talented early... but by the next year, we knew she had a different level than most."

Even at a professional standard, there's a difference to the way Rodman plays. Capable of operating on either wing, her game is defined by exceptional pace – she credits her dad for her athletic genes – and her technical ability on the ball.

NWSL defenders have become familiar with whiplash as Rodman zooms past them and latches onto a long ball or misplaced touch. Her level only rises as the competition grows. She is the youngest player to ever assist a goal in the NWSL play-offs, after Kelley O'Hara headed in her cross to score the Championship-winning goal, and that came after Rodman herself had netted in the semi-final against OL Reign.



Rodman's reward was a host of awards and a new contract, reportedly worth $1.1m, making her the highest-paid player in NWSL history. She also became the youngest woman to be nominated for a Ballon d'Or.

After those giddy heights, she was brought back down to Earth a little when the Spirit plummeted to second-bottom in last season's NWSL. Rodman was still the club's joint-highest league scorer, and there were also some impressive first caps for the 20-year-old American.

"I'm really excited to be known as Trinity Rodman and not just Rodman's daughter," she has said. Even a mere two seasons into her professional career, she has already done plenty to justify fame in her own right, shrugging off pressure with grace, like she does to defenders.



ROMEO BECKHAM

Released by Arsenal aged 13, Romeo Beckham announced he was switching to tennis. "Part of me was devastated," David – his dad, you may remember – lamented. But the football bug resurfaced and, in 2022, Romeo joined the reserves at Inter Miami, the MLS club owned by his old man.

Out in the Sunshine State, Golden Balls Jr knuckled down. "He's committed to getting better every day," declared coach Darren Powell of a winger praised for his crossing and work rate. Sound familiar? Comparisons intensified when Romeo scored his first goal in July 2022: a pinpoint free-kick, obviously.

Last October, Baby Becks accepted an offer to train with Brentford B during the MLS off-season. The 20-year-old impressed enough to earn a loan move for the remainder of the campaign, and now he's getting a taste for English football. "A few of the lads give me some kicks and I give them back," he said. "They're nice boys."

Beckham's January debut for the Bees' second string was observed by his doting dad, who ended up hopping a fence and escaping over an adjacent muddy field to avoid being mobbed by fans at full-time.

Brentford boss Thomas Frank has shared his hopes of seeing the youngster play for the first team one day. Whatever happens, with that name, superstardom's assured.

FourFourTwo

COLLECTION

INSIDE
SALAH'S HUNT FOR GREATNESS



FROM BRUM TO THE BIG TIME

Cherished in his hometown and adored in Dortmund, where next for Jude Bellingham?

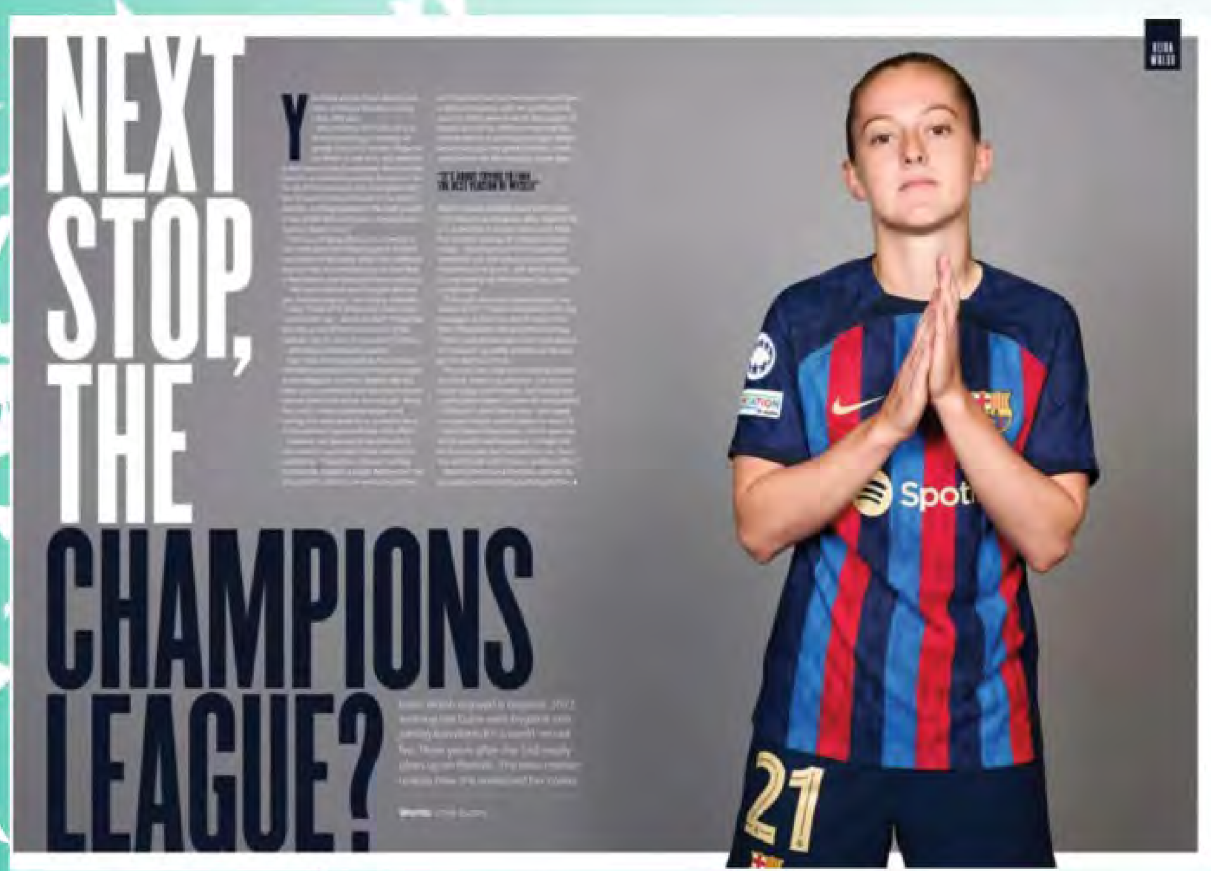


THE 50 GREATEST PLAYERS EVER!

ROBERT LEWANDOWSKI • DIDI • GIANLUIGI BUFFON
GUNTER NETZER • PAOLO ROSSI • KYLIAN MBAPPE
KENNY DALGLISH • MICHAEL LAUDRUP • BOBBY MOORE
PACO GENTO • LUIS SUAREZ • ROMARIO • MATTHIAS SINDELAR
VALENTINO MAZZOLA • STANLEY MATTHEWS • RIVALDO
RAYMOND KOPA • LOTHAR MATTHAUS • SOCRATES
MANUEL NEUER • RUUD GULLIT • THIERRY HENRY
LUKA MODRIC • ROBERTO BAGGIO • CARLOS ALBERTO
FRANCO BARESI • ANDRES INIESTA • XAVI • LEV YASHIN
RONALDINHO • GIUSEPPE MEAZZA • PAOLO MALDINI
BOBBY CHARLTON • GARRINCHA • EUSEBIO • ZICO
MARCO VAN BASTEN • MICHEL PLATINI • FERENC PUSKAS
GERD MULLER • GEORGE BEST • RONALDO • ALFREDO DI STEFANO
FRANZ BECKENBAUER • ZINEDINE ZIDANE • JOHAN CRUYFF
CRISTIANO RONALDO • DIEGO MARADONA • PELE • LIONEL MESSI

50 GREATEST PLAYERS

We're certain that you'll agree with our list of the game's finest performers – honest!



NEXT STOP, THE CHAMPIONS LEAGUE?

KEIRA WALSH

We talk Euro glory and Champions League dreams with the England and Barca maestro



"IF AN ASSISTANT HAS APPLIED FOR MY JOB THEY'RE GOING TO BE THINKING THEY COULD DO A BETTER JOB THAN YOU – YOU SENSE IT"

SECOND IN COMMAND

It's no secret being a manager is a tough job, but what about the men beside them?



BOOKAZINE

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